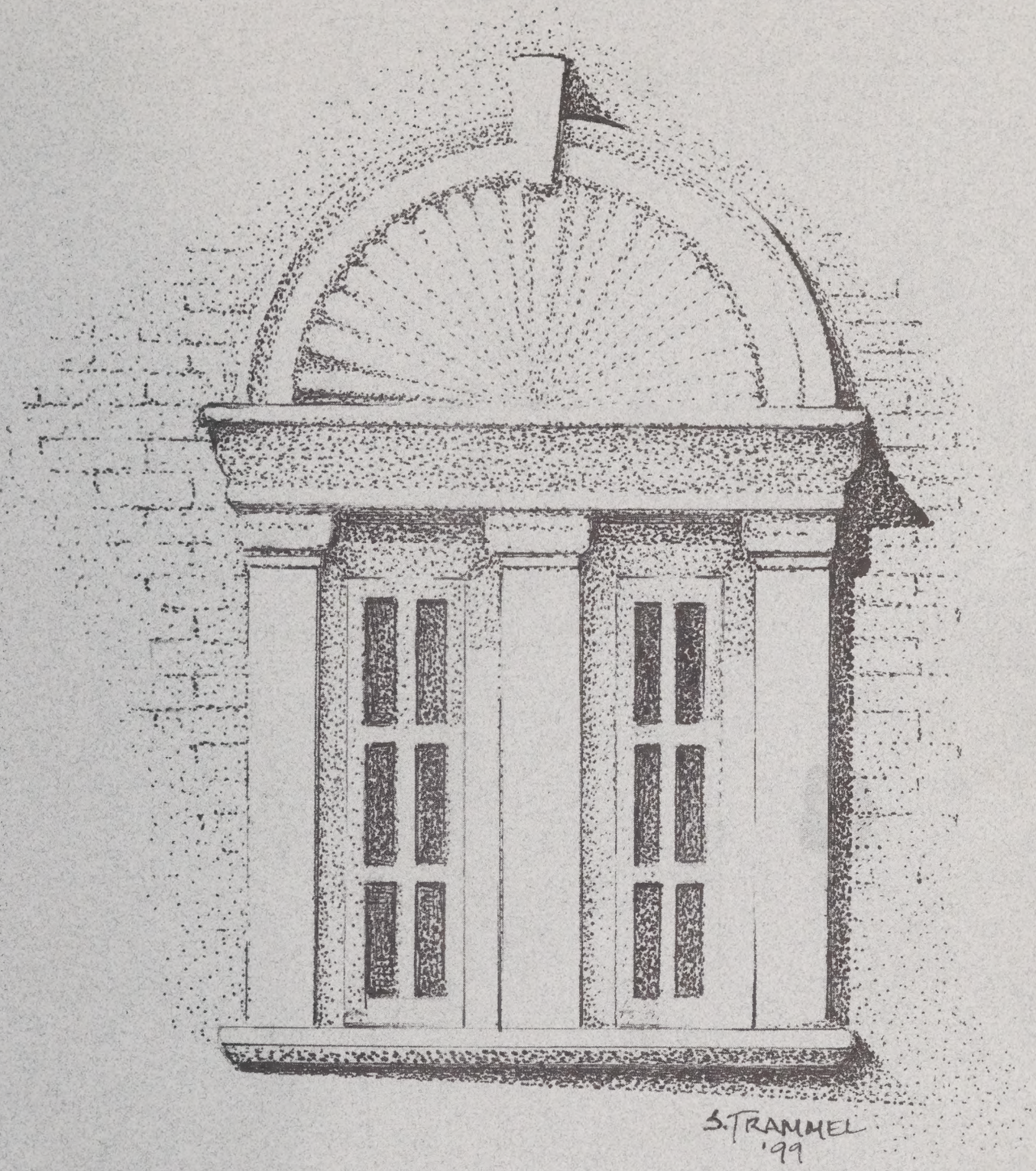

VICTORIA PRESS

1999

Asheville~Buncombe Technical Community College

Victoria Press

Fifth Issue

Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College
Asheville, North Carolina

1999

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Elgin and His Amazing Plastic Snakes from *Waking Up in a Cornfield*

Chris Cox

It is Thanksgiving, and I am standing out in Elgin's yard admiring his plastic snakes. Elgin is my uncle, and we almost always have Thanksgiving at his and Aunt Lillie's place in the strange, beautiful community of Vox, a "suburb" of my hometown, Sparta, NC. Their three-bedroom ranch home is one in a cluster of homes in an area inhabited mainly by relatives from my dad's side of the family. Sometimes we have Thanksgiving at my grandmother's house, which is less than a quarter mile up the gravel road from Lillie and Elgin's, but most of the time we gather at Elgin's, because he always has something to show those of us not lucky enough to be able to attend the family's regular Sunday gatherings.

Last time I was up, he had just bought a new van that he and the family intend to drive out West this summer, and the time before that he had built a flowerbed in the shape of a giant heart in the center of his circular driveway.

Lately, though, he's been on a reptile kick. Suddenly, his house is surrounded by plastic snakes, frogs, and lizards, all situated in gratifyingly matter-of-fact nature scenes. For example, near the large living room window, a three-foot green and brown snake is coiled lovingly around a piece of driftwood roughly the length of a fence rail, while, just around the corner, a pair of rubber lizards sun themselves on a tree stump salvaged from a wood-cutting expedition. Beside the garage, where a flowerbed of marigolds once thrived, a trio of frogs, probably ceramic, sit in a semicircle around a makeshift pond, as if poised to jump in if startled. Elgin is in the process of looking for some plastic tadpoles to help add some ambience to his pond.

Elgin is one of the best men I have even known. He is my idea of the perfect Christian, humble rather than smug, one who models his beliefs rather than proclaiming them from the rooftops. He'll never hold his life up to yours in order to bring your mountainous sins into the proper relief. He doesn't practice what he preaches; he practices *rather* than preaches.

When I was nine or ten years old, I was terrified of going to church because, every third Sunday, the preachers would go into explicit detail on the elaborate horrors awaiting those of us not yet saved, how even the very young would be held accountable for their sinful natures, how you never knew when your time was coming, and how young flesh burned just the same as old. Frequently, I left the church feeling completely nauseated and deathly afraid, my head dizzied by the scent of seared flesh and the tortured screams of the terminally damned. One day, after a particularly jarring sermon during which the preacher got so enthralled in his vision of hell that his voice began to lilt rhythmically while his body swayed to and fro like the pendulum of some eternal clock, Elgin approached me as I leaned against the gate of the graveyard behind the church, looking out over the rows of tombstones, pondering my mortality. Why couldn't I go up at the altar call? Why couldn't I just give my life to Jesus and put an end to the agonizing pressure?

Elgin knew what was wrong.

"You don't need to worry about getting saved until you're ready," he said. "It's not for anybody else but you to know when that time is, and when it comes you'll know. Don't you worry about nothing." Then he pulled me away from the graveyard, back

toward the land of the living. I rode home with him after church, studying him in close detail, as if to memorize all of his features—from his sharp flattop to the architecture of ash at the end of his cigarette—so when I went to bed that night, those would be the images I would remember, and not the hellish images which had been drawn so vividly earlier. Maybe Jesus would save me later, but I needed Elgin to save me then, and he did.

Around that same time, Elgin taught me my first lesson about the hard things you sometimes have to do as an adult. Animals are and always have been an integral part of Vox community. There have been generations of dogs and cats running about through the years, harassing the chickens when they take a notion, letting them enjoy a moment's peace when they don't. Mostly, these are community pets, a little fatter than the average since they get fed at several houses instead of just one, and their diet usually consists of leftover chicken'n'dumplings and such, rather than Purina Hi-Pro.

When I was a kid, one of the neighborhood dogs was a large, beautiful dog we called Red, ingeniously named for his long, shimmering red hair. He was a smart, gentle dog who could do more tricks than any dog we'd ever had in the neighborhood, and the entire family loved him. Unfortunately, he had the habit of chasing cars, and nothing anyone tried could break him from it.

One hot summer day, it finally happened. Red got hit by a car, which crushed his hind quarters and broke both of his back legs. We heard the yelp from the back yard and came running, only to find him in the middle of the road, whimpering and helpless, unable to move. My cousins, brother, sister, and I were hysterical, but Elgin would not let us get too close to Red because he said Red was hurt and might bite us, even if he didn't mean it. Of course, we were screaming for Red to be taken to a doctor, and someone even suggested calling for an ambulance, but Elgin saw what had to be done immediately. He told us to go to the back yard and he'd take care of it. We did as we were told, but in a few minutes I couldn't help but peek, and what I saw was Elgin pointing a rifle at Red. I think I cried out just as the shot filled the hot sky like a thunderclap, and when our ears stopped ringing, Red was no longer whimpering.

I was so stunned, I could not speak, or even cry. I thought Elgin would save Red somehow, and instead he had killed him. It was like discovering that Santa Claus whipped the elves. I ran over to Elgin, ready to unleash all of my grief and confusion on him. How could he so nonchalantly pull Red out of the road like that after having shot him? Then I realized that, in his own quiet way, Elgin was as distraught over Red's death as any of us, probably more so.

"Had to be done," he said to me. "Couldn't let him lay there suffering. He wouldn't ever have been able to walk again. You wouldn't want that, would you? He sure wouldn't have."

As usual, Elgin was right. Red would have been miserable crippled. It took me a long time to absorb that Elgin had done the only thing he could do, the only merciful thing that could be done. I could not have done it. I hadn't been thinking about Red so much as I had been thinking about myself. I loved playing with Red, and I didn't want him to be hurt. Elgin, of course, didn't want it either, but it had happened, and he had done what had to be done, and now he had to try to explain the occasional meanness of chance to a bunch of grief-stricken kids too inexperienced to comprehend anything much outside the boundaries of childhood innocence.

And now, all these years later, chance brings me here again, to Elgin's ersatz swamp. I love the snakes, love the lizards. Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Lord.

Photo by Lee Schleining

"Birthplace of Del Reeves" from *Waking Up in a Cornfield*

Chris Cox

I was on vacation during the past week in my hometown of Sparta, NC, birthplace of the country music semi-superstar Del Reeves, who sang the semi-smash hit "Girl on the Billboard" and was something of a Nashville luminary some 20-25 years back. At the city limits, there is a sign that reads, "Welcome to Sparta, Home of Del Reeves." My grandmother lives next door to Del's brother, Homer. Every so often, Homer's coon dogs get loose and roam around the neighborhood, pausing every few yards to mark the next tree or bush with that special signature for which dogs are famous.

I never knew Del, who was already gone to Nashville before I was born, but I've known Homer all my life. I spent a lot of time during my childhood at my grandmother's house, and I became good friends with Homer's grandson, Greg, who was about two years younger than I. We played whiffle ball in the yard, using a bush, a small tree, and the corner of a flowerbed as bases. If you hit it to the creek, it was an automatic home run. He pretended he was Reggie Jackson or Johnny Bench, and I was Don Sutton or Phil Niekro. We played for hours, then spent the balance of those long summer days tormenting our younger siblings with practical jokes, outrageous lies, and interminable teasing. Greg's sister Laurinda was a six-year-old hellion who could hold her own even in the face of our most fiendish plots against her. She was a tremendously skilled "fake crier," able to sob hysterically on cue and bring their mother Laurene to the porch with her hands planted on her hips. Sometimes, if she was inspired sufficiently, Laurinda would allege that Greg had hit her, when in fact he might have done nothing more injurious than chase her around the yard brandishing a baby black snake in a Mason jar, or maybe just a simple dried dog turd.

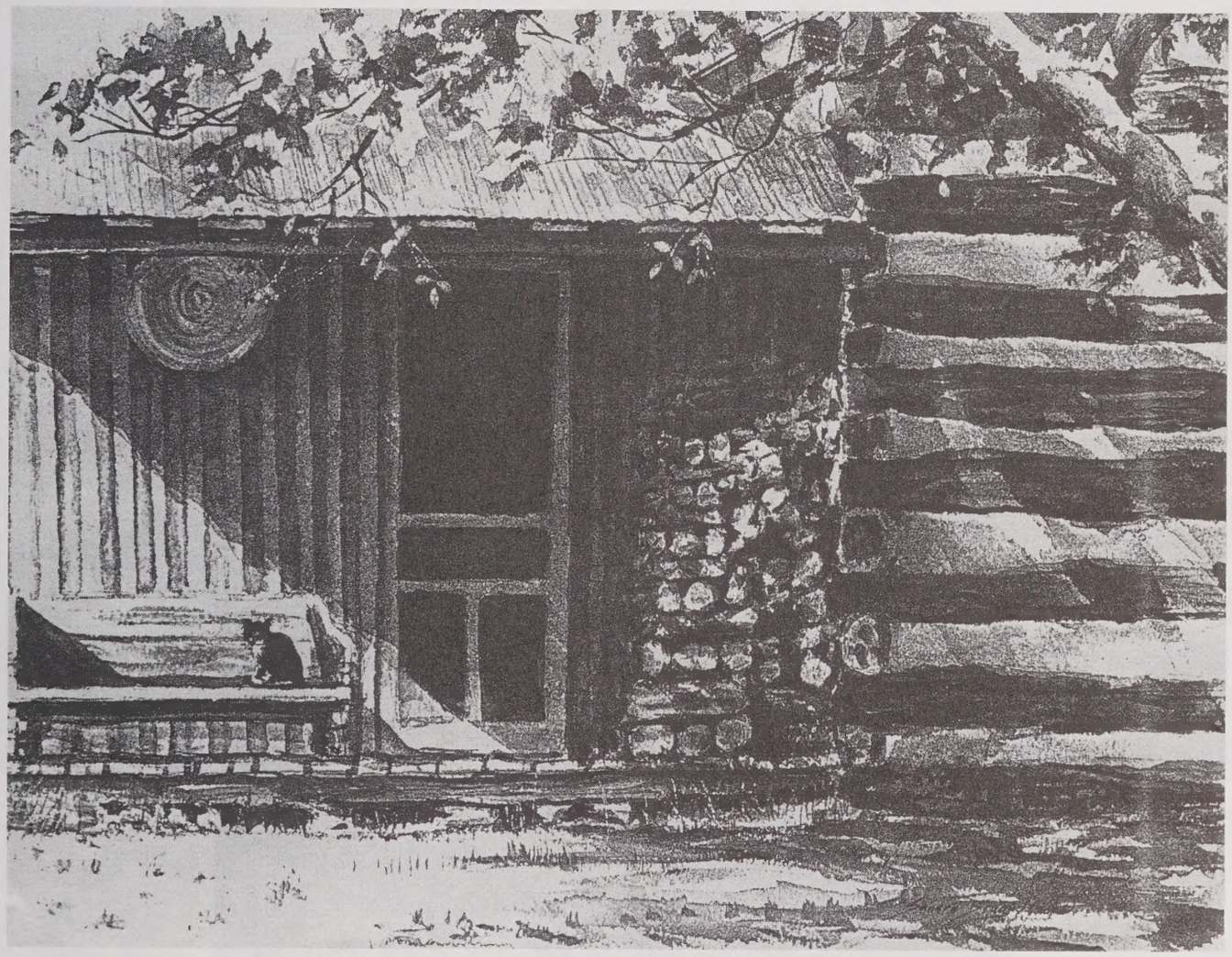
It didn't matter. The verdict was always the same. Laurene instructed Greg to go and cut a hickory switch to be whipped with. If the switch was not satisfactory, Laurene herself would go and cut it, and the whipping would be twice as bad. From my detached vantage point, this form of punishment struck me as particularly sadistic, and therefore marvelous. Here was a descendant of Del Reeves about to get his bare legs striped with red welts by a hickory switch of his own choosing, and I would get to see the entire thing. My own mother, bless her, lacked the temperament for such medieval corrective actions, preferring the "wait-til-your-dad-gets-home" method of discipline.

Not Laurene. She was the very epitome of hands-on. Her arm and that switch were just a blur, like a hummingbird's wings, and she pivoted around in circles, holding Greg with one arm while blistering his legs with the other. It was like something pure, and Greg shrieked so loudly with cries of repentance that Homer would be roused from his afternoon nap and come to stand in the shade of his enormous maple tree and watch the proceedings with a grim face.

A few years later, when I finally was old enough to drive, I'd sometimes find myself trapped behind Homer on the winding road that led to town. There was no place to pass, and Homer has always been famous for never exceeding 25 miles per hour in his ancient white Ford pickup. On the bumper, there was a decal which read, fittingly, "I May Be Slow, But I'm Ahead of You." In the pickup bed, the coon dogs, who always liked to ride into town, danced around like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

Now, all these years later, Greg has his own business in Winston-Salem, Laurinda is happily married with kids of her own, Del still sings the same songs that made him famous, and Homer still has his coon dogs. Saturday night, as I was visiting my grandmother, I happened to look out the window just in time to see the brown one marking his territory on my left front tire.

The next morning, my last day in Sparta for a few more months, I got behind Homer on my way to town. The coon dogs' heads bobbed like apples in a barrel at the Halloween carnival. Fifteen miles per hour. He may be slow, but he's still ahead of me.



Watercolor by Sandra Brugh Moore

The Ambiguity of Morning

Nancy Dillingham

With one arm
on the bedpost
about to rise
you hold me
in an awkward embrace

Through the curtains
dawn sweeps
the gray corners
of the room
clearing away the night

The ambiguity of morning
disappears
and through my tears
I see the fears—
and the light

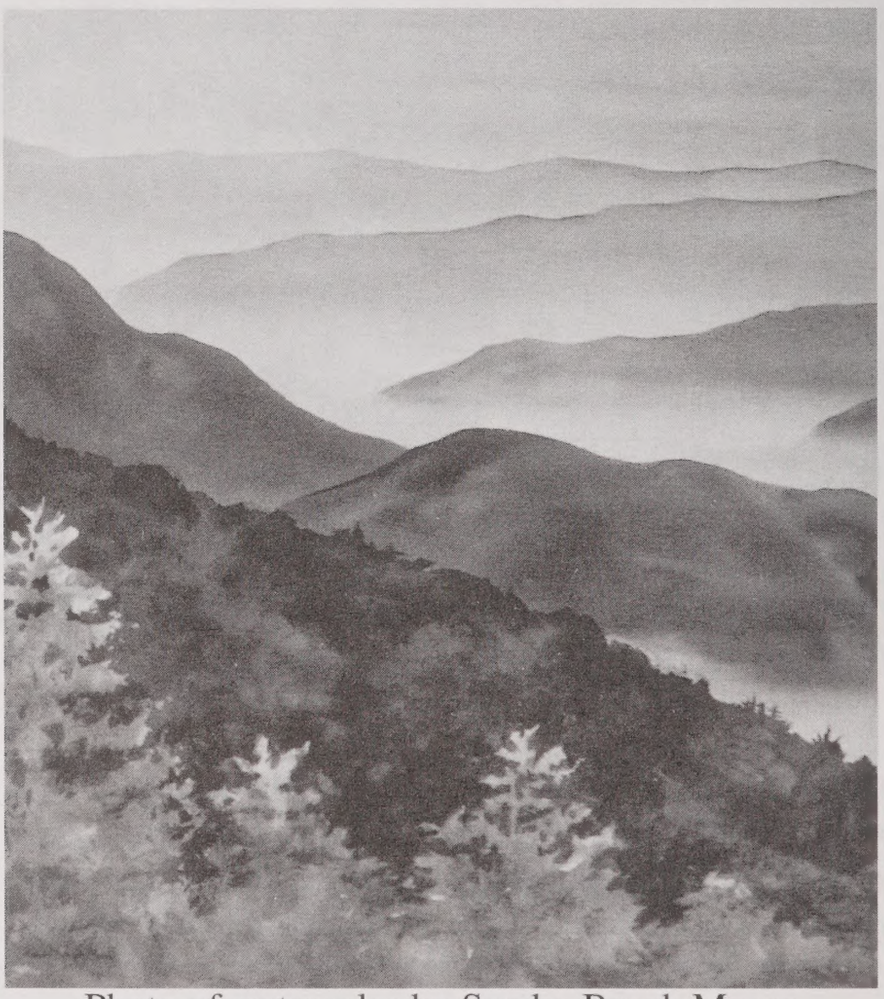


Photo of watercolor by Sandra Brugh Moore

Photo by George Knox

Babel

Julia Nunnally Duncan

The first thing she remembered when she woke was her dog. She looked at the crook of her arm and saw that the dog wasn't with her. So where was he now?

But soon she realized she wasn't at home. This bed, narrow and stiff, was not her soft feather bed. She liked the patchwork quilt of her own bed. This stale wool blanket scratched her legs.

Now she remembered. Like always she had walked the edge of the highway last evening, holding her dog Babel and carrying in her burlap sack the dumpster's discarded loaf of bread and container of pimento cheese—good enough supper for her and Babel. And she rummaged out some scraps of clothes. She never needed to spend money on dresses, the way women in Milton threw good ones away.

The evening had been chilly—downright cold for November—and that and the fact that Babel's whimpering had kept her awake lately made her stop and crawl inside the car at Perry's Junkyard. She hadn't meant to stay there long, just for a short nap, for Babel didn't like for them to be away from home. But the moment she shut her eyes, the stars flickered and whirled in her head, and then she was asleep.

It was a trick her mama had taught her thirty years ago.

Shut your eyes, her mama would say, tucking the quilt under her chin and leaning over her in the dark bedroom. *Picture the Big Dipper,* her mama said and kissed her closed eyelids; *imagine yourself sitting on top of a star. Let it ride you through the sky, till you're so high you can't ever come down again. Up there no meanness can touch you.* And she had risen above the house and into the night, letting the stars carry her through the heavens. On those nights, she never recalled her mama walking back out of the bedroom.

Last evening, the stars had again carried her away, and Babel's voice had not wakened her. And then suddenly—it must have been at dawn—she woke in this place, and she thought she felt Babel in the crook of her arm, but now she realized he was gone.

A stuffed animal was pressed against her arm, and it might have been Babel's small curled body if she let her imagination fool her, but Babel's heat and steady breathing were as familiar to her as her own. No, this was not Babel.

As she lay studying the stuffed dog, someone stepped inside the room. The man, a stranger of her own middle age, whose blond hair touched his shoulders, leaned over her. He grasped her arm and turned it in his hand.

"You shouldn't have fought me," he said and touched a sore spot above her elbow. She looked and saw the bruise.

"Is this your bed?" she asked and stared at him. His denim shirt was half-buttoned and when she asked this, he let go of her arm.

"I'm sleeping on the floor till you get better," he said, turning his eyes away from her.

"You brought me here?" she asked and he nodded.

"Well then, you must have my dog Babel, too," she said and sat up. Now she saw that the small room was sparsely furnished. In the corner stood a straight chair, against the wall a Formica table with a portable T.V. on top. Above the T.V. was a wall calendar with a picture of Jesus holding a lamb. "Why'd you bring me here?" she said.

"A woman sleeping in a car in the junkyard will end up in Broughton Hospital," he said. "You don't want to go there."

"Well, I don't intend to, so give me my dog Babel and I'll go home."

"You're not thinking about what a mental hospital is like," he said, "or you wouldn't let people catch you sleeping in a junkyard."

She threw back the blanket, and the stuffed dog dropped to the floor. She noticed her bare legs, her cotton dress bunched around her thighs. She reached to pull down the dress.

"I've seen you," she said and thought for a minute. "Now I know where." It was at the town pool hall, where she'd seen him leaning over a pool table, teenaged girls standing near him smoking pot. One dusk when she walked by she looked in and noticed him. The girls there were young and easy—she had been one of them in another time, when the room reeked of bootlegged beer.

"I ain't one of your pool hall girls," she said, keeping her past to herself.

"I brought you here to keep you from trouble," he said. "The county can put you away if you're too noticeable. Best to keep away from town, stay out of the dumpsters. You could sign up for welfare, get food stamps. You don't need to sleep in cars."

That was just one night, she thought. But he wouldn't listen, she could tell.

"I prefer my own bed," she said and looked for her shoes. There beside the bed, next to his sleeping bag, was the pair of scuffed saddle oxfords she'd found at the dump last week.

So he slept beside me after all, she thought. It'd been a long time since a man had been even that close. For the past several years it'd been just her and Babel.

She picked up the stuffed dog. "You can't keep Babel hid for long," she said and turned the dog in her hands. Its tan fur was so worn that the coarse threads of the burlap material showed through, and one ear was frayed as if a mouse had chewed it. "This your toy?" she asked, seeing no humor in the question, though the man faintly smiled.

"No," he said and wiped his mouth with his hand, brushing the smile away.

"No," he said again. "It's not mine. I just found it and thought it needed protecting."

"So you been in the dumpsters, too?" she said, grinning herself. A grown man keeping a toy like that—it was kind of funny—and she had thought he could be a lover.

She studied for a minute. "You been in Broughton, haven't you?" she said and looked at him. Now she could see the shadows under his eyes, the weariness in his blue stare.

"A man don't need to dwell on that," he said. "But it's best to recall it every once in a while so you won't end up there again."

"You figure on going back?" she said, and realized it wasn't a polite thing to say.

"I don't plan on being noticed," he said. He sat quiet for a while and then said, "I didn't mean to bruise you. Wasn't no need in that, but you fought me."

"I don't remember," she said. So much in her life she didn't remember as if wads of time had been yanked from her memory. I may not even remember this, she thought, and the idea troubled her.

Picture the Big Dipper was all she needed to think, and then it was like her mind went numb. Her mama had taught her that secret, but maybe it was a curse. After her mama had been pulled from the well and her daddy cried, swearing he had nothing to do with the accident, she had lain in strange beds and let the stars carry her away. Maybe her mama had foreseen that someday she would need the trick of the stars to help her escape the world and its meanness. It seemed that for years after the accident—until men at the pool hall could make her lose herself in another way—her mind depended on the stars. Even now in this man's room, the Big Dipper tugged at her.

But she wouldn't let it take her. If for no other reason, Babel needed her.

"You can't keep my dog hid for long," she told the man. "He'll start whimpering and keep on till I find him and hold him. I never seen a dog that needed so much holding. He probably kept you awake last night. You can't hide him from me for long."

"I knew a dog like that once—" the man said. He seemed to want to say more, but stopped himself.

"What kind of dog was it?" she said, wondering where he might have put Babel. Maybe Babel was tied up outside. Babel wouldn't like that no more than she would. She'd fought like a bobcat when people had tried to bind her. There were places in the county that did that to a person—tied you to a chair to keep you still; strapped you in your bed till you couldn't turn at night.

The man sat with his hands on his knees. His blue jeans looked so ragged she could swear he pulled his clothes from a dumpster too.

"Was it a little dog like Babel?" she asked—"the one you knew once?" Her dog Babel was a beagle, she reckoned. His head was square like a calf's but his amber eyes were as intelligent as a man's. More so, in her opinion. For years his eyes were the only ones she'd seen any sense in.

The man stepped over and took the stuffed dog from her.

"It looked like this dog," he said. He tugged the dog's frayed ear and held the worn face close to his own. For a minute he looked at the plastic eyes and then handed it back to her. She took it as if it were hers. Someway it felt like hers now.

"It was my daddy's rabbit dog," he said. "But when Daddy went away, my sister claimed it. Then they took her away. It didn't live long after that, though. It was a good dog."

"Like Babel, I expect," she said and wished she could remember more about last night. It wasn't like Babel to keep quiet this long without her. Surely the man had put Babel in a safe place. There was a kindness in his voice that the dog would like. It wasn't often that either of them heard kind voices, but this man's words were soft and stirred something in her, a shadow of a memory.

"I don't guess Babel fought you when you brought us here," she said.

"No," he said and looked at her. "Not a bit."

"Why do you stare at me like that?" she said and leaned back against the pillow. She wanted to get up and leave this place, but she wasn't ready to get up just yet; her limbs were growing numb and her mind hazy again.

"I'm just sorry I hurt you," he said and his eyes were so sad she knew he wasn't lying. She had known her daddy wasn't lying then too, though she'd heard whispering to the contrary.

"Maybe I will rest here for a day or two," she said, "if Babel and I won't bother you—" Before she finished the words, her mind was dark and a light flickered and she couldn't hold herself to the earth. *Goodnight, Mama,* she thought as her mama reached to tuck in the blanket.

The man had walked to the bed and covered her with the blanket, careful not to disturb the stuffed dog in the crook of her arm. He leaned to kiss her closed eyes. He remembered his own childhood bed and his mama's lips on his eyelids.

"We'll take care of her, Babel," he said to the stuffed dog, and watched his sister sleep.

Drawing by Constance M. Smutz

Exotica

Nancy Dillingham

The midwife hovers
over the hothouse room
crooning an incantation

Incandescent, glowing with pain
the mother-to-be crowns
then blossoms then blooms

Full-flower, lying in supreme calm
she cradles the baby's nakedness
to her own

the whole world an interloper
surprising, reprising
a sacred rite

a mother in prayer

Photo by Shirley McLaughlin

Faulkner's Mistress
Excerpted from *The Caretaker's Daughter*, a novel in progress

Bill Brooks

Around town Billy was known as "Count
No Count" because men from there didn't

take much to writers and poets and other
types who didn't work with their hands

or at the ass end of a mule or something they
generally considered hard labor whether or not

it was labor at all

spitting and sitting around and talking all the
time they weren't out in the fields sharecropping

the sun beating down on their necks, their backs
sore as hell so that when they grew old they just

naturally grew stooped over with backs as crooked
as a banker's heart—black faces, white faces, children

and women all the same there under that broiling
sun in that broiling place he called Yoknapatawpha.

but come the evening, he'd sometimes stop by and
visit and reach his hands for me, mouth as greedy as

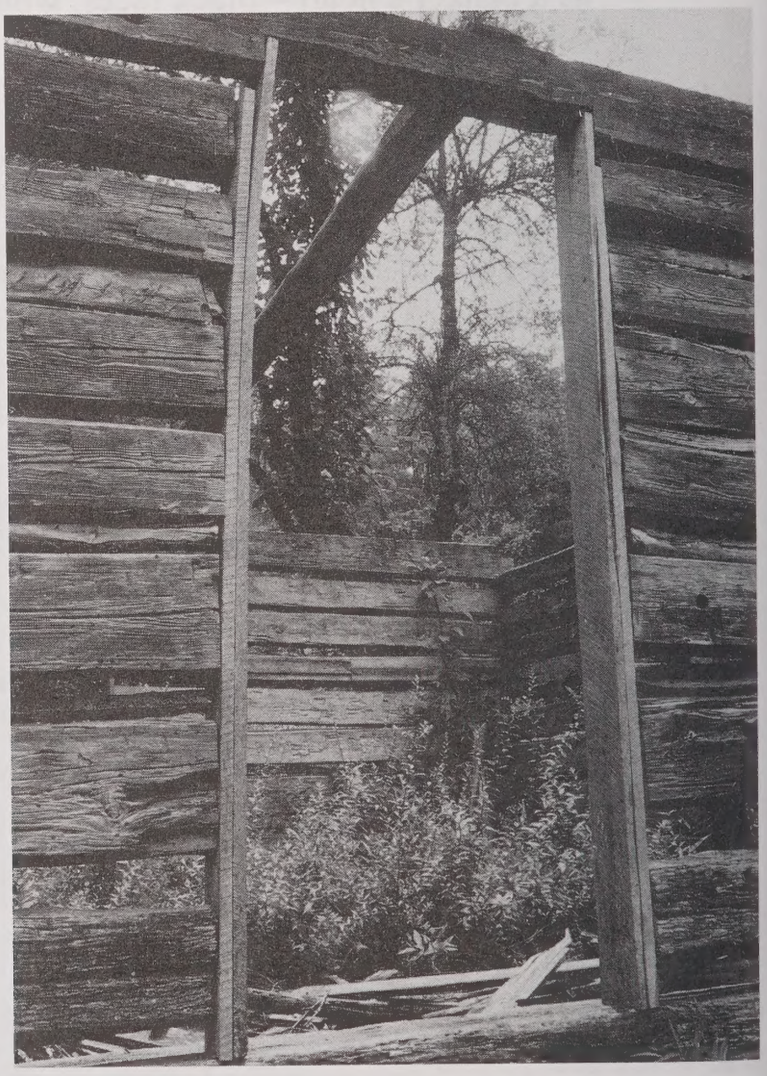
any man I've ever known. Nothing subtle about him,
no poetry in his need of me. Just fine hot blood ripping

through his veins, "burning up his heart," he'd say as
we lay upon the bed, his eyes soft and terrible from the

things he knew and couldn't say to me or anyone including
Estelle. "You know I'm just a man like any other man,"

he'd say, and I'd say that I knew it and would take
him inside me and hold him like I would any other man.

Billy loved me, I think, like he loved us all, and I loved
him for what that was worth to such a man who had so many words.



Photos by Shirley McLaughlin

That Nameless Death
Excerpted from *The Caretaker's Daughter*, a novel in progress

Bill Brooks

The first time I saw death was in an Appalachian farmhouse when I
Was five or six years old. An infant lay in a small casket that rested on
Sawhorses in the family room. There was a piano there as well, and a
Big radio and people sitting in chairs and a woman crying. The infant
Looked like a doll someone had dressed in a white gown tatted with
Lace—its face bloodless as a doll's. I climbed out through a window
And went up into the woods and tried to make sense of it. I found a creek
And sat by it until I heard my father call me to come, that we were leaving,
And I returned and got into the back seat of his black Chevrolet
Sedan and we drove away and back down the winding roads to a town
Where we stopped and ate hamburgers and drank Cokes and I never
Learned why the baby was dead or why we had to go see it.

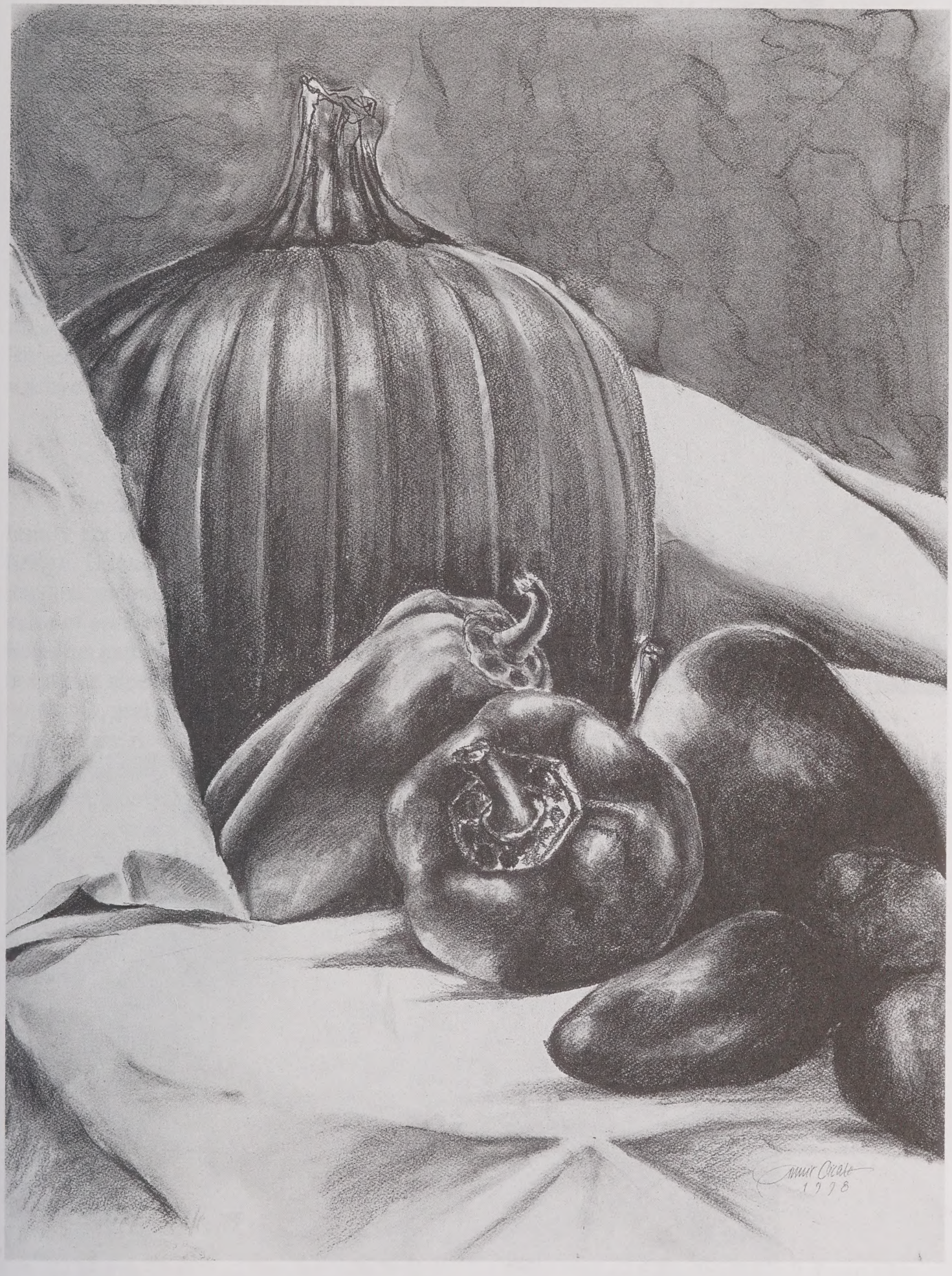
Photo by Celia Miles

Ode to a Dancer in the Café de l'Opera
Excerpted from *The Caretaker's Daughter*, a novel in progress

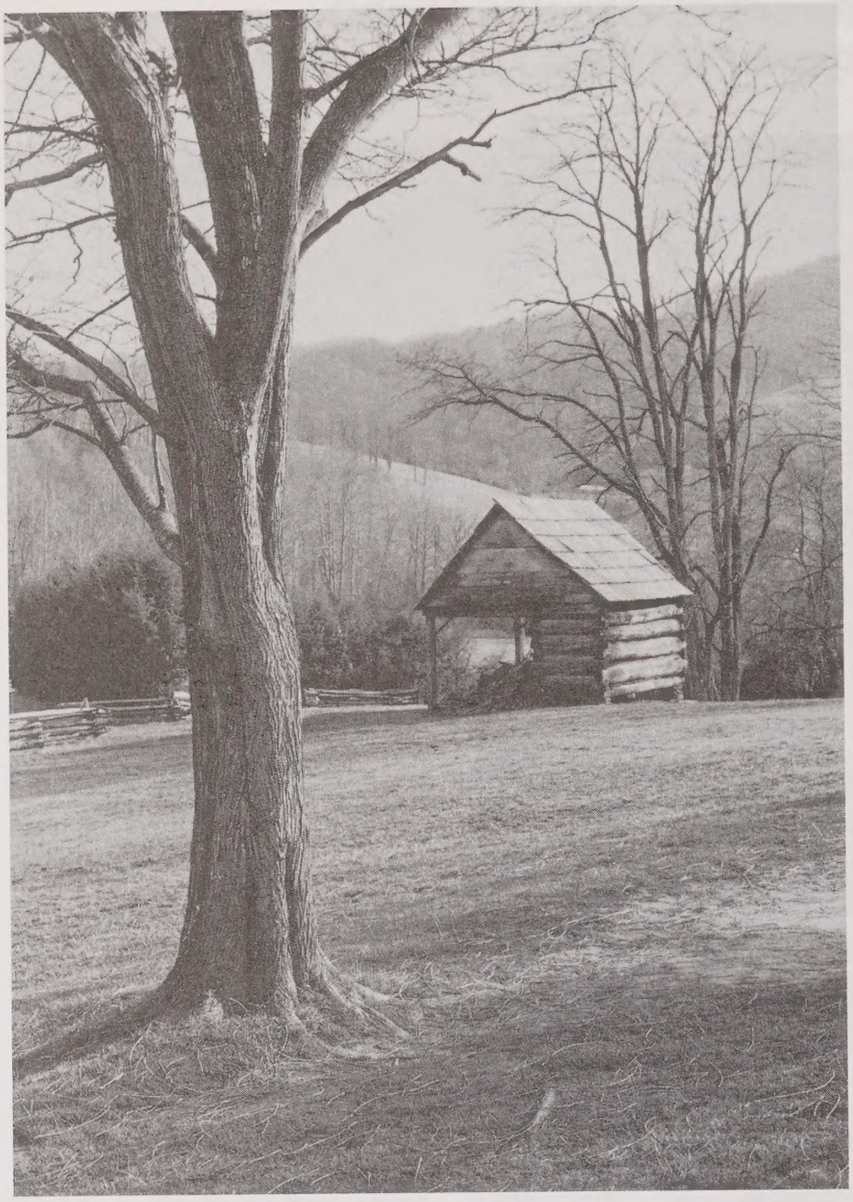
Bill Brooks

"The pain falls mainly on the insane in Spain."
My fingers touch nothing as my heart beats
Parched blood blinding my eyes to everything
But your glance as I watch you dance away
Under callous light, blinking on and off like
A caution signal that warns men not to love
You too much, or too little. Blinking as if to
Warn: Desire. Passion. Regret. Desire.
Passion. Regret. Desire. Passion. Regret.

Drawing by Constance M. Smutz



Drawing by Annie Cicale



Photos by Shirley McLaughlin

The Preacher

from Raleigh *News and Observer* Sunday Reader featuring original works of short fiction by North Carolina writers

Nancy Dillingham

I

Into the house of pain the Preacher comes. It is too hot, his suit too tight, binding him. He moves through a wall of mourners to Cathryn and the small coffin, pushing his wife and small son gently ahead of him. He nods to Cathryn's family, acknowledging them. Then he takes out his Bible and conducts what appears to the mourners from afar a blessing in pantomime. They see Cathryn and her family look up expectantly at the Preacher and his small entourage and watch them all bow their heads as the Preacher says a prayer. Then the Preacher exits as he has entered, his wife and son following behind.

II

The next events also happen as a slow-motion pantomime. The Preacher and his family get into their small, black car, drive down the lane and start over the small, wooden bridge. Uneasy and swollen from recent floods, the bridge tosses its burden, coffin-like, into the waters. The Preacher's son, sitting in the back seat, a hand expectantly holding the sides of each of his parents' seats, is tossed out of one of the open windows, appearing boneless and shapeless as a bundle of clothes. As the car floats through the air, the wife in her white sleeveless summer dress drifts in a slow pirouette out her door, which opens as by magic, and disappears into the water like a sleight of hand being performed. The car lands in the river on its side and begins to fill with water. The Preacher paws the air as if swimming and mouths their names soundlessly as he struggles from the car, his door jammed, having taken the full impact of the toss, before he, too, washes free of the accident and appears to reach out an arm and catch quite effortlessly the small bundle of his son. Then, like an apparition in a white suit, he also disappears into the water.

III

At about the same time, in a field wild with sweet clover, a young boy tempts the devil in his own pantomime. In an enactment of a slow-motion rodeo, he glides soundlessly through the wide expanse of the field and lands his looped rope like a lasso around the thick neck of the startled bull he has come to fetch. Down the hot highway he drifts towards home, victorious and heroic. Then, impulsively, he knots the rope in his hands around his belt. A sudden sound, someone's yell perhaps, spooks the bull, and in a flash, the hero is undone, down, dragged to a too-early death.

IV

The apple tree spreads its great arms and lets go its blossoms. They drift down like snow and settle under its canopy where a small drama is taking place. Cathryn sits in her

childhood swing, holding onto its ropes with her slender, white arms. Tommy holds her from behind, his hands on her in a motion ready to lift her and then push her forward. She inclines her head backwards toward his and, his hand still over hers, he reaches with two of his fingers and teases a strand of her hair, loose and streaming in the wind. She touches her soft, flushed cheek against his. He is hungry and tastes her lips that are pink like the inside of the apple blossoms' buds and her throat which is white and fragrant as the blossoms in full bloom.

Much later, after Tommy has pushed her so high that her toes punch little holes in the sky and they are winded and laughing together and they have said good-by, Cathryn still sits in the swing, lost in reverie when the Preacher walks up behind her, noiseless on the white sea of blossoms, dizzy with desire. . .

V

Her eyes closed, Cathryn takes in the redolence of a warm summer day. The screened-in back porch and the silence and the light are her sanctuary as she sits in the oblong tin tub bathing, all pink, breathing light and feathery sounds, opening up in the warmth of the afternoon sun. . .

As she rises out of the water, she hears a soft footfall and turns slowly at the sound of the wooden screen door opening.

He sees her stand up, all white and pink and glistening with water, looking at him in sleepy surprise. One purposeful stride and he stands in front of her. In what seems like one seamless motion, he sucks in his breath, lifts her out of the water; and she lifts her arms, drapes them around his neck, and lets out a long sigh; they move and breathe as one.

VI

Hearts as heavy as the now-closed lids of the four wooden caskets—one much smaller than the other three—and the one that all eyes keep straying to—lift as the Preacher strides forward, and the whole congregation of mourners rises in one spontaneous gesture, as if to lift him or hold him up as he begins.

In the part of their hearts that they reserve for breaking, the old ladies in the front row with their fans and their white gloves and their pinned, veiled hats contrast the figure in black before them to the vision that drifted up the aisle, resplendent in white, golden red hair shining, brilliant blue eyes flashing, the Sunday he preached his first sermon in the church.

The Preacher begins by reading a passage from Matthew Arnold's poem "The Buried Life":

"But often, in the din of strife
There rises an unspeakable desire
After the knowledge of our buried life
A thirst to spend our fire and restless force
In tracking out our true, original course;
A longing to inquire
Into the mystery of this heart which beats
So wild, so deep in us—to know
Whence our lives come and where they go."

The Preacher's words wash over the mourners with the same power they have held from the beginning, somehow cleansing and assuaging their sorrow.

VII

The ground is white not with snow but with apple blossoms soft and warm, not cold like her heart. The air smells sweet, not acrid like the taste in her mouth. As they lower the small box into the shallow grave, she thinks the rich, newly turned earth could be furrows in which to plant seed to flourish and grow and flower. But it is her baby she is burying, and she thinks she cannot savor the sweetness nor feel the warmth ever again.

VIII

Six months later, the Preacher stands alone on desolate ground, a cold wind blowing the gray headstones free of snow that has obscured the names carved on them. He touches his wife's stone and traces his life with her as he traces her name. Then he rests his hands on the stone of his son as he has many times on his narrow shoulders, gently guiding him along. He walks to a family plot where young Tommy is buried and places a piece of dried clover from the fields on his headstone. He moves finally, and perhaps most painfully, to a corner of the graveyard where Cathryn's infant Grace rests. He bows down, encircling the small stone in his arms.

The wind is silent, still as the Preacher rises and walks off the hill towards home.

Drawing by Constance M. Smutz

First Deeds

Bill Moore

Three corn seeds
Deep in the womb wet earth
Blood blest, nature blasted, opening their
Universe to the clay. Mother nurturing
Father giving, life claiming, forest singing
Tree priested mountains. Who can know the Holy
Trinity of the leaves and the sunlight, darklight
Mysteries of the blade of grass?

Birth and Death
Sky filling, life giving, crying
The seminal tears, flowing down the
Dark belly of the universe and giving it
Light.

Seed upon seed,
Life upon life
Deed upon deed.
In the darkest pit, the light
still shines.

Drawing by Annie Cicale

Dentist

Celia H. Miles

"I'd rather be a knot on a hickory tree than to have to go to the dentist," Aunt Mattie said. She adjusted her black hat and made a face at her image in the mirror. Her left jaw was so swollen that she couldn't really pull much of a frown, and when she let her guard down I could see the pain in her eyes.

"Can't I go with you?" I'd never been inside a dentist's office. I wanted to see—and hear—for myself.

"No. I told you Addie and her brother's coming by to get me. She's getting a permanent wave while I'm at the dentist's."

I thought I'd like to see a permanent wave being given plus see the teeth-puller's torture room. Aunt Mattie thought I shouldn't waste my time.

"You've got schoolwork to do, young lady. And the other chores you've been laying off to get done."

It was true I had been so busy reading *Lorna Doone* lately that I had neglected a few things around the house. Aunt Mattie didn't expect me to do a whole lot, but I'd promised to split kindling and to re-stack the woodpile that had fallen down two weeks before.

"I'll have supper ready," I promised. If Aunt Mattie could have smiled without hurting, she would have. I saw the little gleam in her eyes. Cooking was not something that came naturally to me.

"Just some soup beans, June. I won't be able to chew anything anyway."

It was dark when Addie Schuler and her brother brought Aunt Mattie home. Luckily I had fixed a big pot of beans and the cornbread was in the warming oven. When all three came in the front door, I knew we'd have company for supper.

Brad Schuler put his hat on the peg and settled himself in front of the fireplace. The women looked exhausted. They came in the kitchen.

"Run get some kraut, June, and I'll fry us some potatoes. The Schulers are eating with us."

"Are you all right?" The swelling seemed to have gone down some in Aunt Mattie's jaw, but her lips were drawn to the left. I had some trouble understanding her instructions.

"Yes. Minus not one but two teeth." She was already picking potatoes out of the bin and fumbling for a paring knife.

"Sit down, Aunt Mattie," I said. "You look done in. I'll get the potatoes started in just a minute. Everything else is ready."

It surprised me that my aunt did leave off what she was doing and join Addie at the kitchen table. As I hurried out to the spring house, I saw in the semi-darkness Addie's hair.

"What in the world—" I dashed out before I finished, knowing what I was about to say was uncomplimentary. Addie's gray hair was frizzled up in little tight kinks that made her head look like nothing I'd ever seen.

In record time, we were seated at the table and I'd poured buttermilk for all of us. I was proud of my first "cooking for company" supper, even if it was just ordinary fare, no chicken or ham. Brad Schuler set right in to eating. He looked up only once to say "Good potatoes, June. You'll make some man a good cook one of these days."

After that one comment, like he'd uncorked a bottle, both women started talking.

"Lord, Mattie, don't talk to me about the tooth-puller!" Addie crumbled bread into her beans. "If you want your head fried and your brains just about jolted out of your head—go to Thelma's. If I'd a-knowed what I was in for—"

"Well, I'd risk that any day, compared to that dentist chair." Aunt Mattie's voice even quivered just a little. I couldn't believe it. I'd seen her deal with burns and cuts and stone bruises and bad headaches without more than a word or two of complaint.

"What happened?" I asked.

Both women answered at the same time.

"He set me down in this cold-as-cream chair, I was surrounded by these little instruments, picks and tweezers, and before I knew—"

"Thelma's got this contraption with wires coming down in all directions—" Addie chimed in.

"'This ain't going to hurt much, Miz Geer' is what he said. 'But I've got to look in there. Open up.'"

"And Thelma took these chemicals out of this bottle and that bottle, smelling to high heaven—"

"I'd put my glasses on this little tray beside the chair, so I couldn't see right clearly, but I saw that needle in his hand. 'Lord, Doc,' I said, 'is that meant for me?' I could see that needle sharp enough and that dentist's teeth. Now he's got the prettiest teeth I've ever seen on a man. True pearly whites. I thought I'd tell him I just wanted a pill or two—"

"Thelma's got a washing chair, and she had my neck bent backwards and my head in that wash basin before I could say more'n that I wanted a permanent wave, fine as she give Miz Duffey last month. Long as I can remember this was the first time anybody's fingers have been scrubbing my head besides mine. The shampoo just foamed up. She's got a way with washing hair, I'll tell you. My head won't recover 'til a month of Sundays."

"'Bad luck, Miz Geer, there are two molars that will have to come out. Truth be told, I ought to delay on one of them, a little abscess there. You do want them out, don't you? This will sting a little.' How was I supposed to answer, me with my head in these little padded cushions and a big white cloth clipped to me. He kept on talking, mumbling this and that and waving that needle around. I had both eyes wide open, but I couldn't say a thing. Now, that needle part was the scariest part, when it scrunched right on into my gums, I thought I'd die—"

"And the minute Thelma pushed me back straight up after a-rinsing and a-rinsing, she started in with them wires, just a-twisting this way and that. Then she started attaching me to that machine, clamping me tight as a drum. Lordy, all I could think about was that electric chair in Raleigh—"

"Funny thing, after I thought I'd die, I kind of lost track of what was going on. Then all of a sudden, I thought my face was going to come apart from my head! I could hear this scrunching and wrenching and pulling and tearing, and I had to hold on to the chair or I believe he'd have pulled us both right out of that chair and through the wall and down Main Street, it was that bad. There was this sucking sound—"

"My hair was all twisted up and Thelma was a-humming to herself, halfway talking, things like 'your hair's coarse, it'll take a wave just fine, am I hurting you' and all the time I feel like my eyeballs are being pulled back to China, they'll never be the same—"

"This sucking sound—and he said 'Ah, that's the worst one. Might as well go ahead while you're here. You feel anything?' What could I say, blood gushing out as it was and me with my head over that little sink. I was spitting like crazy and feeling this big hole in my mouth, and—"

"Well, she turned on the power and I swear I heard my head a-sizzlin. I smelled something burning too and I said—"

"You know I couldn't say a word, my lips wouldn't work right. Now that's a funny feeling. You got something to say—though I don't know if I would have said 'stop' or 'get the other one'—and not a thing happens. In a flash he was back in my mouth and I held on to the chair while he pulled and twisted. I was sweating by then. What a blessed relief when he held up the tooth and I started spitting blood again. Now I hope that's the last time I ever darken the door of that or any other dentist."

I shivered and put my hand on Aunt Mattie's arm.

"'Thelma,' I hollered, 'you're a-burning my head up!' I was getting seasick of that smell and all them potions she used before hand. If I'd been out of doors I'd have puked right there."

Addie covered her mouth with her hand; she realized she'd said a word that wasn't for the supper table.

"I mean it, Mattie. Still Thelma just come over and untwisted one of the curls and said I'd need a few more minutes."

"That smell's enough to turn a man's stomach," her brother said. "Good thing your man's working in Yancey County."

"You shut your mouth, Brad Schuler. Don't talk like that in front of June."

"Do you hurt now, Aunt Mattie?"

"I'm feeling better, just got what feels like two of them—what did you tell me about last week, June? Two big craters in my jaw. I'll be fine. But never again will I darken his door."

"And Thelma, she charged me extra for some fine spray she used. That's likely what you're talking about, brother. You don't know a fancy smell when you smell one."

Aunt Mattie must have gotten her lips under control. She smiled at me and said to her friend, "Of the two of us, Addie, it's a toss-up as to who got the worst deal. But my ordeal don't show!"

Photo by Shirley McLaughlin

Photo by Constance M. Smutz

Hope

Lonnie Dockery

I didn't get to kiss her goodnight last night
And see her sleep so innocently like an
angel taking a nap.

I didn't get to wake her this morning,
gently, like I always do, so as
not to startle her.

I didn't get to carry her into the bathroom—
though she's almost too heavy to lift—
And watch her flinch when I try to flip the light switch with her toes.
She'll miss that.

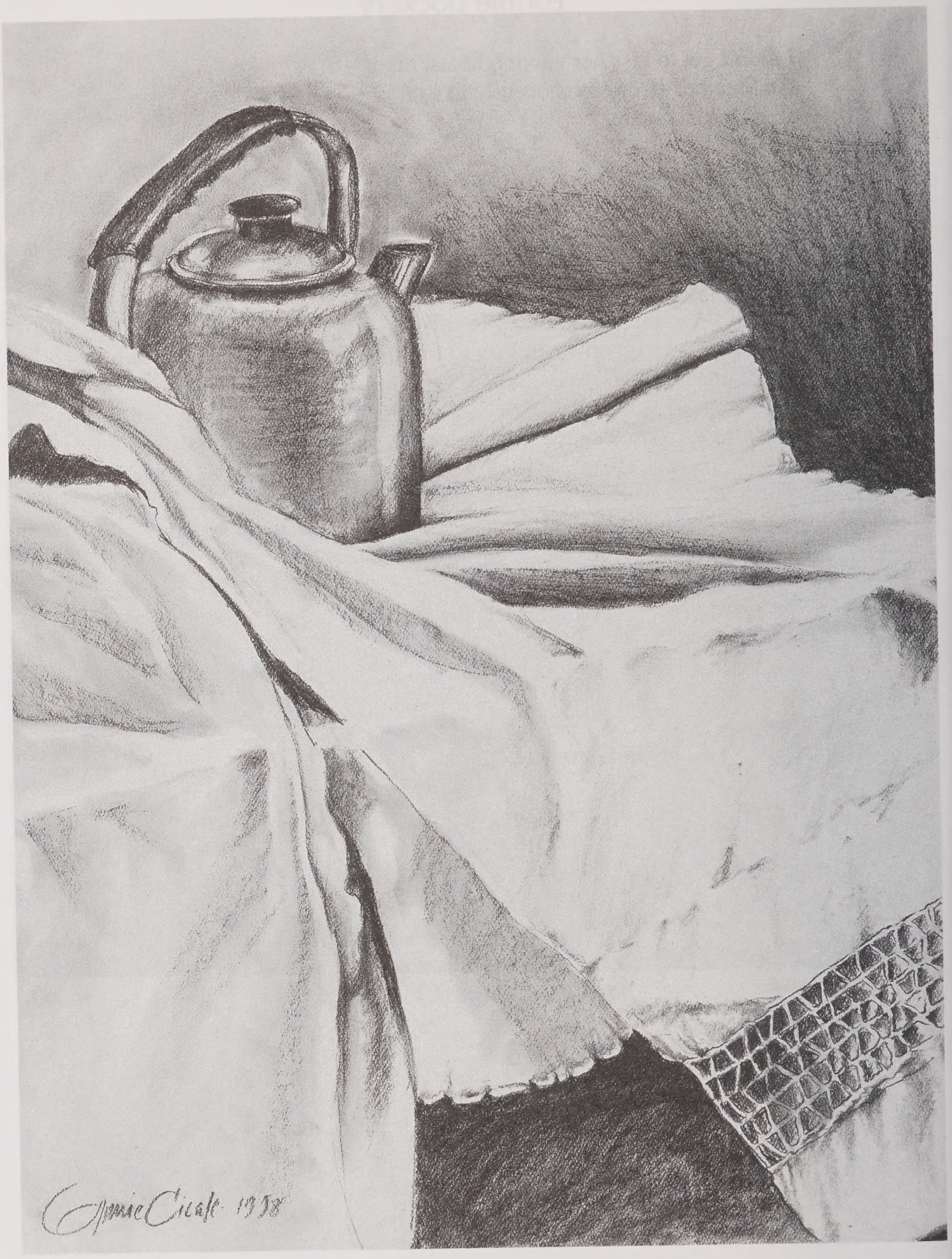
I didn't get to watch her at breakfast,
looking through sleepy, half-closed eyes at her food,
propped on one elbow, her hair everywhere.
Then suddenly wide-awake, remembering a story from yesterday
that she just has to tell me.

She's gone today. I didn't sleep last night.

Her mother doesn't love me anymore.

Tonight I have to be gone.
Tomorrow she'll sit here without me.

But there will be other mornings together.
Somewhere.



Drawing by Annie Cicale

Papa Turner's Passing

Cynthia Stewart

My grandfather, nearly ninety, passed away.

On the day of his funeral the pews of the Baptist church,
where he'd mourned the passing of friends, family,
two wives and three daughters, are filled with friends,
family, a wife and three daughters mourning his passing.

Papa, your coffin reminds me of Mama's in this same sanctuary three years ago. With hollow-hearted sorrow, I sat beside you as you cried openly. "It's a terrible thing to outlive a child," you, who outlived three, said, mourning your child nearly sixty when she died. You shook your head and looked away as if Mama's profile there in the coffin was a mistake you could not face.

My grandfather, nearly ninety, passed away.

He begat six daughters, who begat his ten grandchildren, who begat a host of great-grandchildren, one of whom begat his great-great grandson.

Papa, on your eighty-eighth birthday—the last one you would remember—you took that baby boy on your lap and, as Kodaks flashed, you blessed this boy—first-born of the fifth generation.

My grandfather, nearly ninety, passed away.

My two sons remember you as we drive to your funeral.
The oldest, a gangling nine-year-old, remembers when you gave him firecrackers at Christmas—a gift I viewed with motherly concern, he with ecstasy.
Papa, you never forgot the longings of a boyish heart.

"And him gib me chocwit," my four-year-old says, bringing to my mind all those bright, hard-freeze Carolina Christmas days in my childhood when you brought my little sister and me our own bags of chocolate drops.

My grandfather, nearly ninety, passed away.

Papa, Aunt Edith, your youngest daughter, remembered you in whispers last night as we sat beside your coffin in the funeral parlor.
"Daddy was always a practical man. Why Mr. Brown said that one morning last winter Daddy appeared unannounced at his door, said he'd come to settle up his funeral. Sat down and matter-of-factly spelled it all out—the pallbearers, the songs and the Bible he wanted placed in his hands. Said he picked out his coffin without batting an eye, and then pulled out a roll of hundred dollar bills and paid for the whole thing. Now ain't that just like him..."
Her voice drifted off as she stared back to the coffin.

My grandfather, nearly ninety, passed away.

The last song is sung, and then the undertaker moves to the front of the church, folding the shroud with prepaid reverence. With practiced gentleness, like he's tucking in a child for the night, he closes the coffin. A dull thud mars the breath-held stillness.

Papa, another phase of our lives ends as we view for the last time a face that has graced our Christmas tables, our Sunday dinners, our celebrations and sorrows.

With the look of blessed assurance of which you sang at Aunt Edith's piano after Sunday dinners, you faced eternity clasping your Bible—your oft-quoted life journey guide, your self-chosen death journey shield.

A desperate longing to hold on, to stop time, seizes us and frees tears cried as much for me as for you, Papa.

We mourn your passing, the passing of generations, the passing of time—yours and our own.

And then we're outside, following your grandsons—your appointed pallbearers—leading the line to your grave.

My grandfather, nearly ninety, passed away.

"Sunny burial day a sign of grace," mourners say, sweating in dark suits and wool dresses as they sweep across a winter-browned hillside warmed by a diamond-bright January sun that's been shamed for days by the weeping of pearl-grey skies low hung over your death bed.

"He's better off," mourners say, "trading that nursing home for heaven."

I nod agreement, Papa, recalling the last time I saw you alive—
the tubes, the labored breath, the urine stench of that nursing home hell.

I couldn't stay, hurried away from the shell of that massive oak of a man who left us that October night, felled by a single stroke.

"Yes, he's better off." All agree.

"But we're not," a granddaughter says, tears melting her voice as she walks away from the mound of mums masking the raw, red-clay wound of your grave.

My grandfather, nearly ninety, passed away.

After the funeral, family and friends return to Aunt Louise's house for a meal cooked by the ladies of the Baptist church.

A wreath of greenery and white lilies hangs on the front door where one hung for Granny nearly 30 years ago.

Papa, this house, now your daughter's, is the house you built for Granny—sweetheart girl of your youth who in hers bore you six daughters and died suddenly two weeks before she turned 60. You grieved her and then moved on, taking a late-life wife who was a cherished love for nearly two decades.

And after her death you took a third wife, an unhappy mismatch chosen in grief, a mistake you forgave yourself.

After the divorce, you moved on and married a widow, the plain-spoken Mary Ann, a friend of your youth who outlived two husbands while you outlived two wives. She graced your final years with companionship and sat with straight-backed sorrow at your funeral.

Papa, the day after your funeral, another unseasonably warm winter day, I sat with her in your front porch glider watching a squirrel scurry across stone steps you built yourself. "That's Sammy," Mary Ann said, "looking for Papa." She told me how you named and tamed the squirrels that live in the oak that shades your quarter acre of front yard. "Why he got 'em where they'd come right up to the door to get pecans he shelled for them."

My grandfather, nearly ninety, passed away.

A year before he died, he sat reminiscing about his life before a gas log fire in the living room of his cozy home located in the neighborhood surrounding the textile factory where he worked for nearly forty years. The cotton mill, as it was known, operated around the clock and was the focal point of the lint-littered neighborhood. It was the dragon in their midst that couldn't be ignored. Its clanging machinery and rhythmic looms, groaning and coughing, expelled a fine cotton dust that frosted window sills and automobiles in the tree-shaded neighborhood that sprang up around it.

Papa, that day you told me how for years you worked the second-shift at the mill after farming all morning.

"Hard work won't kill you," you said, smiling. "I'm living proof of that."

"When I was nine, I started plowing behind a mule on the Tugalo River bottoms right here in the hills of South Carolina, and I've been going ever since.

When I got grown, I saved up enough to buy a piece of land of my own, and, before I got on at the mill, I worked them fields from sunup to sundown six days a week. Then, come Sunday, I'd be walking 'em again before church to reason out what I'd do next." You shook your head, laughing at your foolishness.

You, Papa, the Depression soldier, warring on poverty, working two jobs, managed to keep that wife and six daughters. "The mill was good steady work, and them were good years—made a lot of friends there...course probably some enemies, too," you said, winking at me, and then naming some of your best friends, counting blessings like lines on your hands. Papa, you proved with mathematical certainty that counted blessings multiply.

Papa, on that day when you talked so openly about your life,
I sensed your peace and satisfaction.

It has been said that when a just man dies,
lamentations and praise, sorrow and joy are one.

Papa, we who are left behind, are sorrowful, lamenting our loss,
but we are also joyful, praising your life lived hopefully, abundantly.

It is a rich legacy you leave us, Papa.

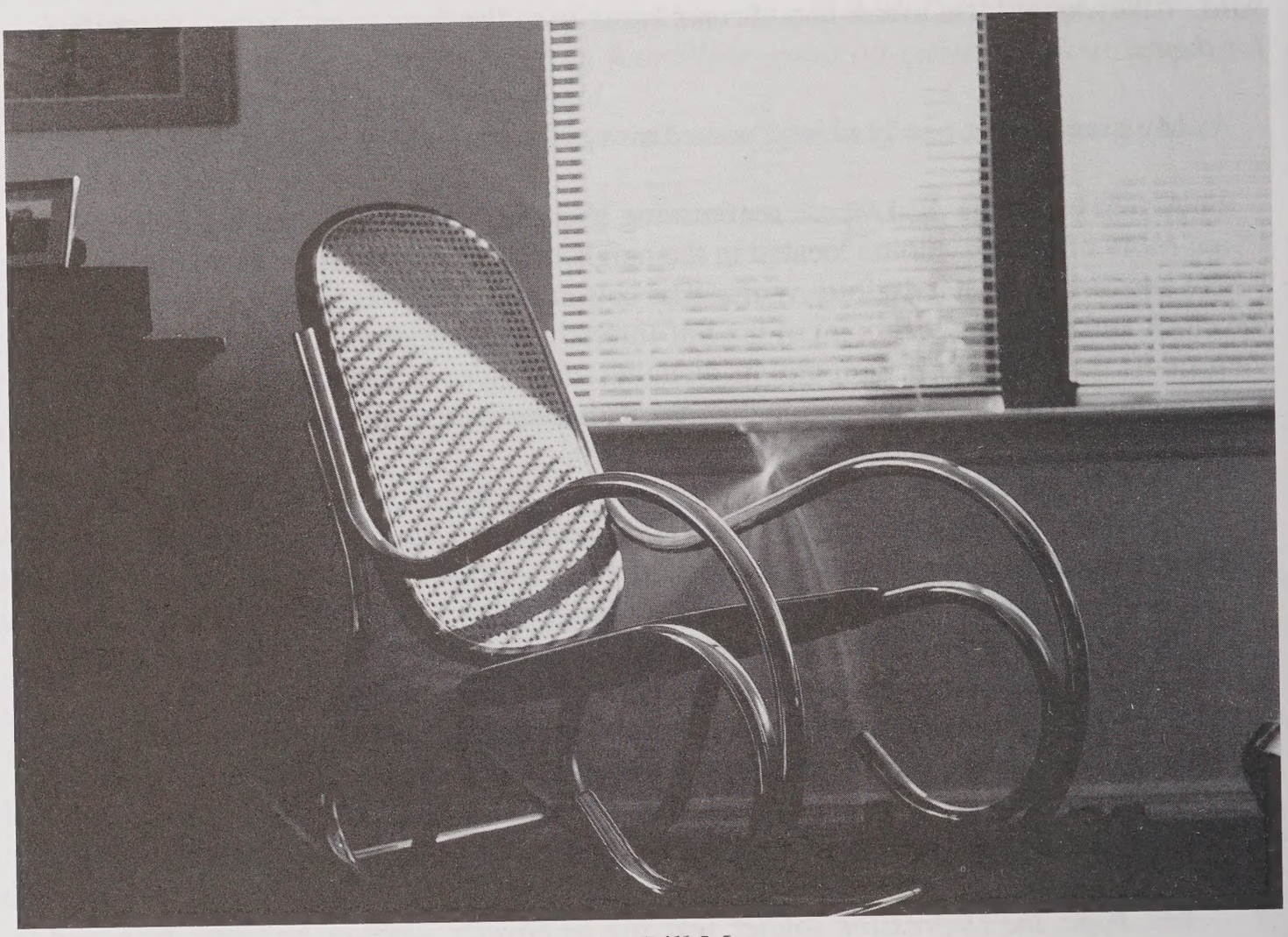


Photo by Bill Moore

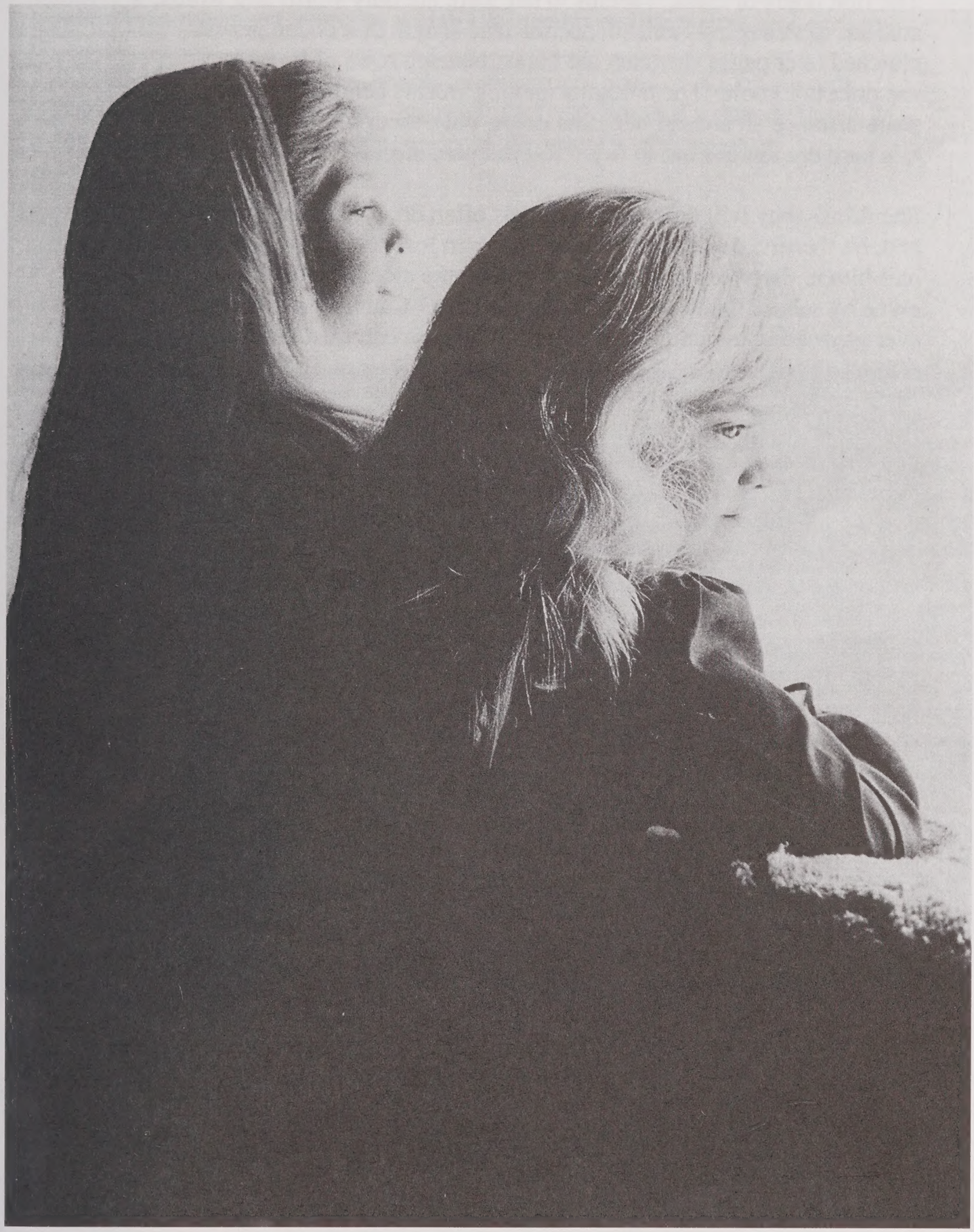


Photo by Constance M. Smutz

Her Students Write in Her a Sestina

Lisa Johnson

The first hours of class, it seems to her there are only words and words,
anxious as strangers—and silence the lead-length of a dozen pencils
clutched over pages she fears are blank, beneath rows of fingers
she does not know. The thoughts moving worlds behind their eyes
write distance all around her. She doesn't ask them for poems;
it is hard enough for her to say, "Tell me your stories."

She thinks they will answer, as students often do, "We have no stories,"
and, on the first day of class, there's more to lose than nervous fingers,
nail-bitten. Between instructions, she asks the clock, "What poems
come by school light? Am I speaking...chalk? Can uncertain eyes
ever grow accustomed to each other? Who here can trust that words
offered up will not be taken as lightly as most take pencils?"

And then, a shift of tempo: the days begin to disappear like pencils
in a writer's hand, too rapidly, almost, even for a writer's eyes
to believe... How...this sudden consciousness of moving fingers,
moving measures of lives as different as the beat of stories,
and risking, like parents risk in letting children go, their poems
letting go, in some ways young as children, in others old as words?

Midterm hypothesis: she must have known them always. Their words
moving her deep and long as plates of earth, she tells them why stories
have been to her a need like the next breath, why the first pencils
she held seemed no less beguiling than the first spoken poems
must have seemed to men and women those narrow days before eyes
saw the wonder of paper, or minds the possibilities of fingers.

She watches now—and they do not seem to mind—how their fingers
move on the page as if—priest-wise—they have been called to poems
and have known from the beginning that all their beads of stories
are as vows of resonance to the same omniscience that knows pencils
should not be taken lightly—their lead, the silver gift to make words
visible and thoughts of women and men through generations of eyes.

In the last hours, their faces open like the peacock's feather eyes, disturbance she can rest in. The sweeping whisper of their pencils write in her a sestina. "Sixteen weeks," she says, "reading your words, your breathing...and now in my veins, the rhythm of your fingers moving on the tables of my classroom, these memories, these stories older than paper, yet young as womb-life, searching like poems..."

"Your eyes stay," she says—her classroom empty now—"and your words, legacies, like fingers reaching, many-jointed with the soul's shared stories, light as the pith of fine pencils, heavy as the marrow of fine poems."

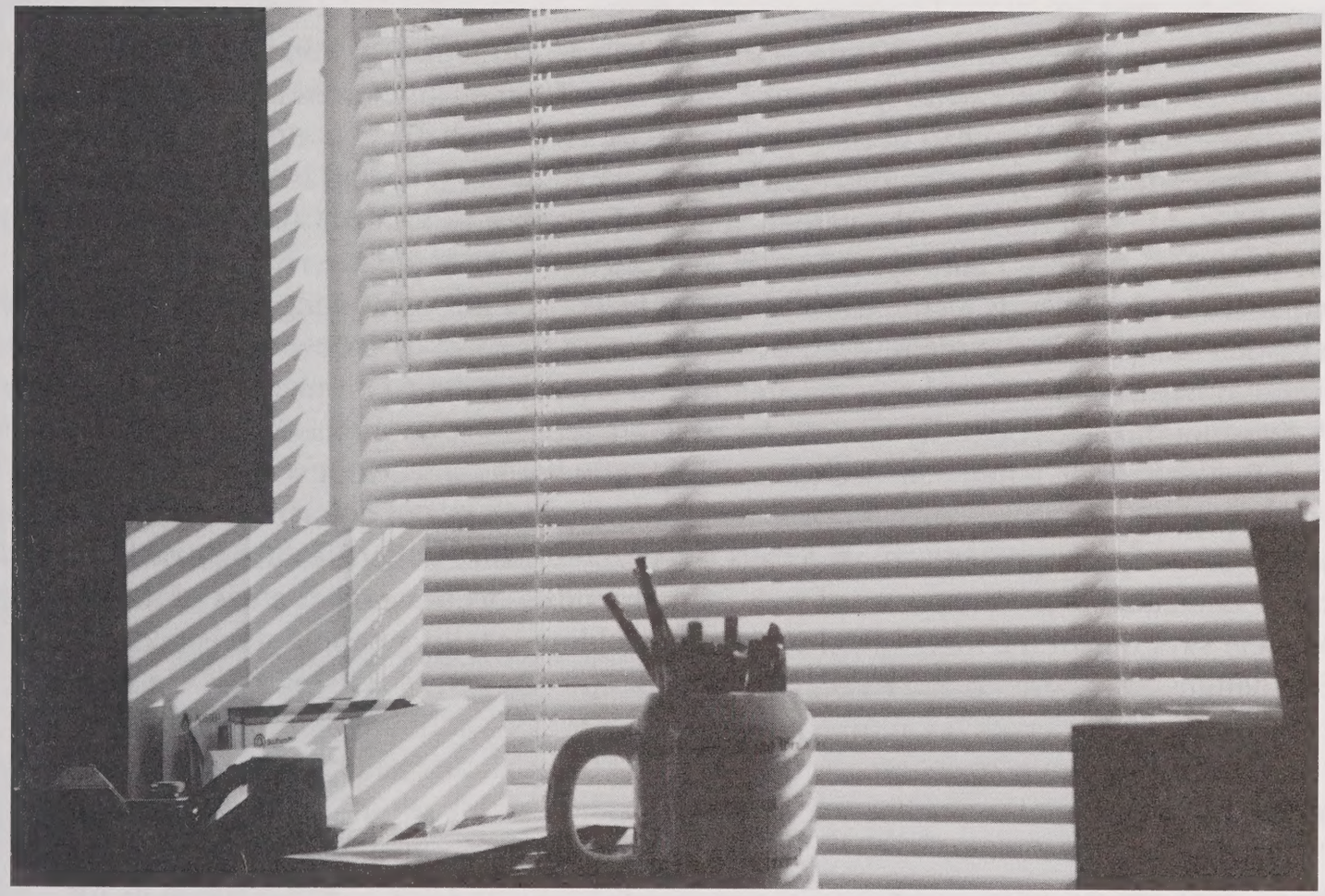


Photo by Bill Moore

Women Welders

Gabrielle M. Thompson

Nestled in the mountains of Western North Carolina, McDowell Technical Community College is on the cutting edge of creativity. A group of women has invaded the male-dominated field of welding—using plasma cutters, welders, torches and a forge to create metal art.

Gale Oliver was the first of the group to take welding in 1984. She was experimenting with the idea of welding as a career. Gale had been introduced to bulldozers, backhoes, and front-end loaders by her father, who installed in her a sense of independence and the willingness to try anything. She decided against welding as a livelihood, taking a job with the college instead. However, she continues to take the class as a creative outlet, using found objects as a basis for sculpture. She used a tractor seat to form a flower base and a can of rusted nails to mimic its pistil and stamen. A four-foot-tall, painted metal hummingbird hovers over the flower. Throughout her garden fairies, butterflies, and cats peer from perennials.

Gale convinced Maggie Gross, a soft-spoken grandmother, to join her in the welding classes. Together they create spectacular sculptures for the Amy Gross Memorial Garden. Maggie's daughter Amy had been an employee of McDowell Tech, but died at an early age. The garden, six years in construction, reflects all of her love and longing for her daughter. At the entrance to the garden, a metal Excalibur protrudes from stone, a hint of the fantasy to follow. Pathways meander by trees and towering butterfly bushes to cross expanses of flower beds teeming with brilliant hues even through a long, hot summer. It is a garden composed of gardens, each with a flavor all its own. In a cove beside the river, metallic fairies dance from branches and hide in ferns, burnished bronze in the setting sun. A five-foot monarch butterfly sips nectar from a large flower set in the midst of an extensive flower bed. In a more shaded area, a dragonfly with a three-foot wingspan rests upon an iron cattail. A twisted wrought-iron tree basket holds a riot of colorful blossoms, while across the path a large wind chime awaits a breeze. Smaller butterflies, frogs, owls, and cats—dedicated to the memories of past feline friends—decorate other areas of the garden. Maggie says one of the things she loves about welding is telling people she is taking it! She delights in their look of amazement. Her philosophy in life is "Don't let age stop you, or anything else! When you have a dream, go for it!"

Susie Painter and her husband own Painter's Greenhouse in Old Fort. She heard about the class from friends but was leery of invading the male turf. Instead, she found: "When they realized we were creating something so different than they had ever thought about, they were impressed. Especially the younger ones. They would come to us for creative advice and offer to help weld the larger pieces." She was elated to discover how easy it was to use the plasma cutter to cut out shapes. She made freehand templates, taking ideas from children's books and selling the finished product at the greenhouse. She is currently pricing welding equipment. She says: "Gardening is a big hobby. Anything you can make, people will buy. And welding isn't dangerous; you just have to be cautious. I'd recommend it for anyone as an outlet for their creativity."

Sue Benton is another MTCC employee who has taken the class, focusing on the art of silver jewelry making. She also made yard sculpture in copper, and a bat wind chime. (She is a spelunker.) She hopes to take the class again, as she wants to create a wood and metal sculpture.

Tammy Buchanan, Cary Poteat, and Tonya Band are graphic design students at the college, all of whom took the class for an elective, and for fun. They enjoy working with their hands and using what they find at the junkyard. Cary said, "I like stacking up various things to see what fits, kind of like playing with Legos." She turned an old, ornate coal stove into a Victorian footstool by cutting it down with a torch and reattaching the legs and handles to the bottom. Lamps, flower pots, and votive candles were formed from old farm equipment. Tammy made a lamp of metal leaves and garden art ranging from decorative birdhouses to a panther. Tonya's main sculpture was a six-foot dragon. Her young son laid claim to a steel cockroach meant for her garden.

I work in the library at the college. In the 1970s, I helped my husband build a seventy-five-foot gaff-rigged schooner in California. After twenty years afloat, I dug into gardening in my new, land-locked home in Western North Carolina with a great deal of pleasure. I planted extensively. I took the welding class in winter so I could work on my garden in the off-season. I used an opaque projector to enlarge a silhouette of a two-inch angel to a three-foot tall fairy. I cut her body from stainless steel and her wings from copper. Pounding the copper with hammer and chisel to resemble leaves, I was able to produce exactly what I had envisioned. Smaller fairies surround her in my flowerbeds. Next, I fabricated a pair of three-foot swans, delicately floating over waves. Our real swans willingly pose for pictures by their metal reflections. More avian metal sculpture followed, from hummingbirds to cockatoos. Cats, lizards, and frogs also romp through flower beds. Everything is made of stainless steel. People are astonished at the amount of quality sculpture I formed in one semester.

Jamie Ward, a welding instructor, has this to say about women welders: "They have such great ideas about what to do. A woman looks at things from the bottom up. What scrap is lying around, she can see how to put it together to make what she wants. A man usually has an idea of what he wants and then has to figure out how to make it work. It doesn't always work. Women are just so creative." Clyde Hollifield, the head of the department, adds: "Women make good welders because they have good hand-eye coordination and finesse. We no longer are just battleship welders. A lot is in air-conditioned labs now, doing dental bridges, electronics, space age stuff. Brains are needed for welders, not just brawn."

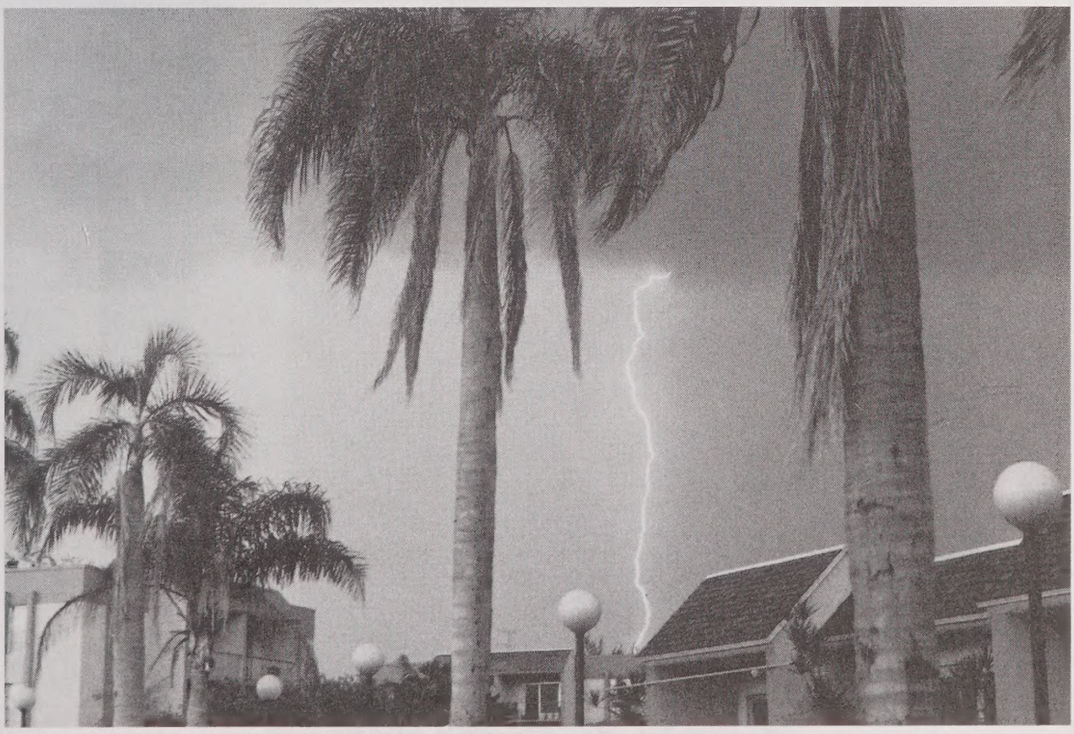


Photo by Bill Moore

Most Beautiful in the Bud

R.B. Goodstadt

Although I love the elegant beauty of the purple-robed Siberian...
(Perhaps even more than the extravagant colors and styles of the bearded...)
When it gets down to it, as far as irises go, for me,
Nothing surpasses the subtle beauty of the Siberian in the bud.

Its lovely hooded tip pointing skyward, its simple majesty cloaked.

And I sit distracted by the wonderful color and texture in the blue-glazed bowl in front of me:
Irises share the stage with wooly lamb's ears, soft and grey apple mint, and the antique oddness of the horsetail: wonderful sight!

Hard to think about Vietnam and the horrors of my generation,
When I can drink in such beauty.

Photo by Shirley McLaughlin

Drawing by Sandra Brugh Moore

Two Fountains

Ren Decatur

William Thomson Farquharson, my maternal grandfather, was musically gifted. At the age of fifteen, he had a full scholarship to the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. After some of his instructors discovered that he enjoyed playing piano mostly by ear, he lost the scholarship and could not continue his university education. He got a job on a merchant vessel and jumped ship in New York City. A part of his life was spent living and working, and singing, in Atlanta, Georgia. Not only was he gifted with a rich tenor voice of operatic quality, he was also a phenomenal pianist. We could hum a tune to him and he could play it with such extravagant melodic and harmonic frills that we had to listen closely to follow the original melody.

As a result of his musical prowess, it is not surprising that he was a member of the First Methodist Church choir when he and his family lived in Atlanta. I can clearly recall the innumerable occasions when my little brother and I accompanied my grandmother and grandfather, Nan and Pop, downtown to the church on Wednesday nights for choir practice. Since, at the ages of four and six respectively, my brother Douglas and I were not particularly good at sitting still for several hours, Nan often took us across the street and around the corner from the church to a small city park where she could read and watch us as we ran and played during Pop's choir practice.

These outings were some of our favorite times during the years in Atlanta in the 1950s. The tiny city park had nothing much more than a small area of grass and trees at the end of a city block. Except for one feature—a huge water fountain with a shallow pool around it—there was nothing distinctive, especially for small children. In effect, the fountain was the park. The diameter of the pool was probably about sixteen feet or so, as I recall it now. It seemed immense, with a fountain that shot water like a geyser high into the air. Sometimes the geyser grew incrementally to its full height, moving a few feet at a time until it reached its peak; other times it shot to its full height all at once. The fountain's center was unique. Surrounding the fountain base was a ring of underwater flood lights, each of which had a different-colored lens covering. The pastel hues of red, blue, yellow, green, and purple alternately shined on the fountain, producing the most exquisite rainbows to be found in any landscape. Douglas and I ran around the fountain squealing with delight whenever the fountain came to its full height and the colored lights draped the geyser with their various rainbow robes. Sometimes the colors were of one hue; other times the lights flashed on and off dramatically like a slow strobe. Sometimes only one color infused the fountain, and other times several flashed on at the same time, showing different colors on different sides of the geyser. This was a magical place for my brother and me. We imagined gnomes, elves, faeries, and other elemental spirits cavorting with us around this enchanting place. We always considered it extra special when Nan took us to the colored fountain.

Living in close proximity to our grandparents was always thrilling for my brother and me. We spent many pleasant hours in the company of our Nan and Pop. On many occasions, Nan took Douglas and me shopping downtown. Sometimes we persuaded Nan to detour intentionally so we could at least ride by to see the colored fountain, and that was thrill enough, even if we couldn't get out and race around it or feel the splash of its misty cloak draping us with its sparkling magic. Just to see the colored fountain was excitement to us.

One particular excursion downtown, however, will remain pasted into my memory forever. Nan had taken Douglas and me to Rich's Department Store on Peachtree Street. Actually, this store spanned Peachtree Street, half on one side of the street and half on the other side of the street, connected by a glass-walled walkway one or two stories up from the street. We loved going across that walkway, too, for it was unique in its day and special for little children to peer over at the traffic and pedestrians below. At one end of the walkway was Rich's luncheon counter where we occasionally had lunch with Nan.

Nan always had a chicken salad sandwich, I remember, and Douglas and I sneered at each other privately whenever she ordered it because we thought such sandwiches to be rather repugnant. We ordered the more prestigious grilled cheese or peanut butter and jelly, something which didn't contain such a cryptic mixture of ingredients. Like many children, at mealtimes we religiously and painstakingly segregated the vegetables on our dinner plates from each other and certainly from our meats, lest in touching each other they became tainted. So, while dining out, we never jeopardized our digestive purity by ordering something which contained such a mishmash of foods as chicken salad did. This practice was especially notable at home whenever we were served vegetables which we did not like. Asparagus, for example, made me retch. I never ate that stuff, although I always had to try at least a spoonful of whatever it was that I didn't like, or I could have no dessert. It was always a hideous color, that asparagus, sort of an olive drab. It smelled "pukey," and imbued every other morsel on my plate with its own particularly disgusting taste if it so much as brushed up against other foods. Were it not for the possibility of being considered a baby, I would have used a plate with those divided sections, so as to keep the foods on my plate in their proper neighborhoods. I may have been finicky, but I had a philosophy to support it. Tainted foods were unhealthy. To have asparagus brush against my applesauce, for example, created a major trauma, for I loved applesauce, but I could not, would not, eat it if it had become tainted with asparagus residue. It might as well have been sprayed with some poison; it could not have been more odious.

At Rich's then, Nan guided us to the waiting area in front of the lunch counter. There was always a wait at lunchtime at Rich's lunch counter. Being too young to appreciate sitting still and waiting, I spotted an intriguing water fountain and wished to investigate its contents and to grab a sip of that cold, familiar water before lunch. I can still hear the humming refrigeration unit contained in the bottom of the fountain. Before I pressed the button, I stood anticipating the chilled liquid rising from the spout to numb my lips and mouth before it trickled down my throat. Then, I reached out in almost giddy excitement to press the button. But, before I could touch the button, Nan grabbed me from behind and dragged me away, across the mezzanine to the waiting benches. Douglas sat there, appearing angelic as usual, waiting to see what I was about to be punished for and secretly hoping he wouldn't laugh out loud when I got whatever it was I apparently deserved. But, to his disappointment, I wasn't punished, at least not that time. Nan simply sat me down and talked with me about something which Douglas didn't understand and only half heard. His annoyance at my lack of physical punishment was obvious when he began to squirm in his seat from pretending to be satisfied with, and appreciative of, the waiting. He was always a good actor. What Nan said to me produced a shocked dismay and a curious confusion.

She said, "You went to the wrong fountain, Honey."

"No, I didn't, Nan," I corrected.

"Oh, but you did," she replied. "That fountain is not for us to use. See the sign above it?"

I looked again at the sign; it said, "Colored."

"Yes," I said with tears filling my eyes, "I saw that sign and that's why I went to that fountain. I wanted to see and taste the colored water, just like in the colored fountain."

She said, "That fountain is for the colored folks to use. We don't drink from that fountain."

When she released her hold on me, I rushed up to that very fountain and pushed the button. The look on my face, Nan said, she would never forget. That look registered disillusionment, distrust, and disappointment all at once. The water was, of course, clear liquid; it was not the colors of the rainbow and it would not taste different from the water in the fountain which had the sign over it saying "White." I didn't understand. It was so unfair.

"Why," I asked, "if the water is the same clear water in both fountains, are there two fountains, Nan?"

She said, "Because, Honey, that's the way it is."

Photo by Shirley McLaughlin

Photo by Shirley McLaughlin

Regular As Rain

Cynthia Stewart

I start watching for you as soon as the bus approaches your house
with its shady, swept yard, its wisteria wound, stocky oak and
its two-story farmhouse, peeling yellowed paint.
No sign of a wife, just you alone working in your garden
or busting up firewood in a regularly diminishing pile.
I imagine your droopy, red-dirt dusted overalls would smell
of sweat and denim like Granddaddy's when I crawl up in his lap
after school with my snack—a cold biscuit filled with a scoop of sugar.

You're a black man, "colored," we said then, skin well-milked cocoa,
a salt and pepper, Uncle Remus beard and frizzy white hair, well-trimmed.

I'm a white girl, a second grader whose swish of long, black ponytail is
bound in a rubber band wound so tightly my eyelids are slanted.

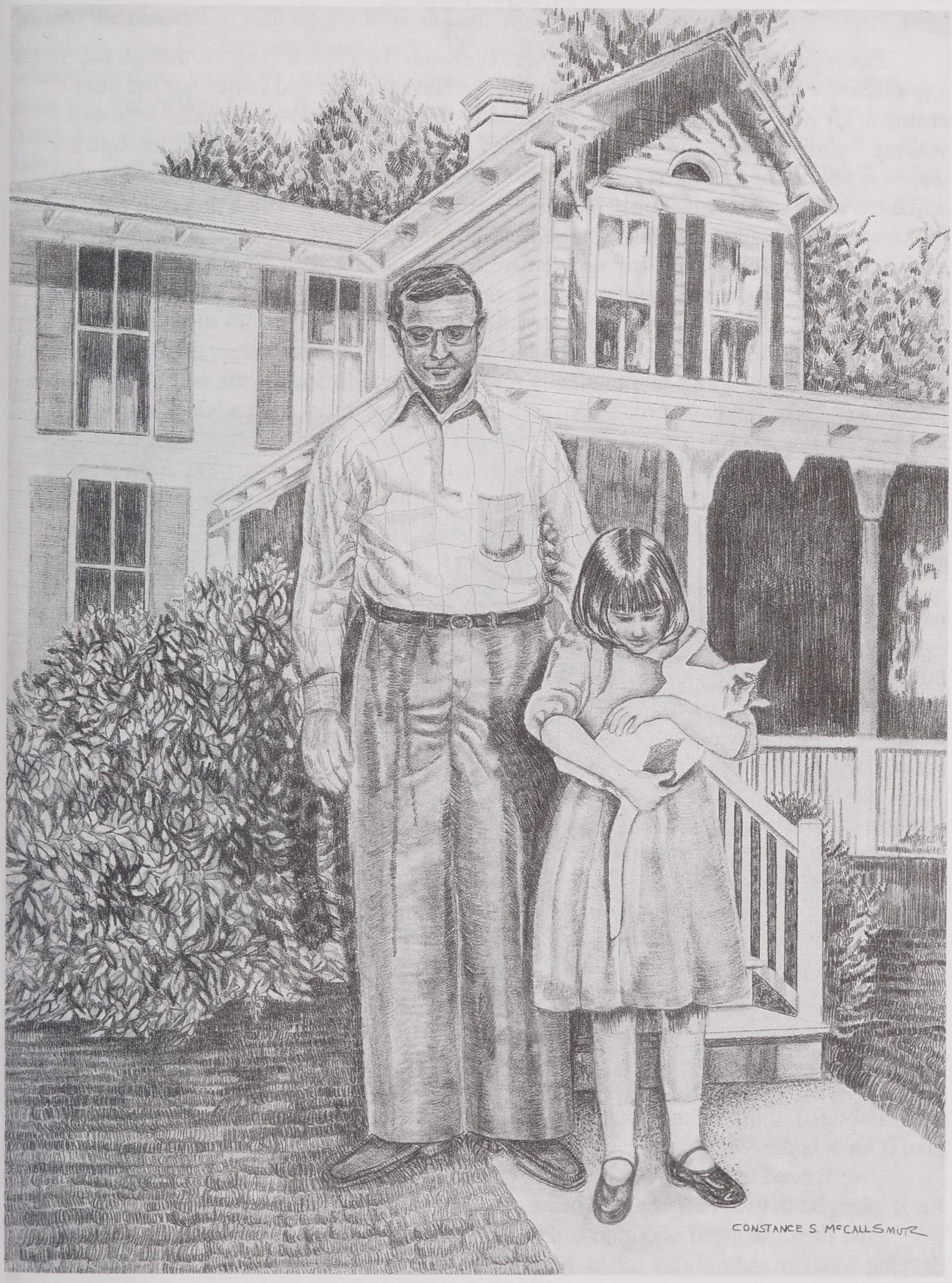
I'm sitting at the front of the bus near the driver like Mama told me to
after the boys at the back teased me to tears,
calling me China Eyes and pulling my ponytail.

Trimmed, raven bangs across my forehead are straight as the wrinkles
that delineate my troubled thoughts as we approach your house.
You are hoeing your late summer garden,
cutting manure into crumbles of Carolina clay,
minding your own business like Mama says more people ought to.

The boys at the back stampede to your side of the bus,
thrusting hands out the windows,
pumping raised middle fingers to the rhythm of
NIG-GER-NIG-GER-NIG-GER
'til you're out of sight.

I wonder what you think, eyes staring down the row.
Do you keep hoeing, viewing their hatred as being as natural,
as recurrent as the weeds that threaten your greens?
Or do you switch to splitting wood?

Forty years later I still remember you, coming into view—
a man I never knew or spoke to,
a man who, each day, regular as rain, could have set his clock
to the tauntings of school children with lessons to learn.



Drawing by Constance M. Smutz

Survival in the French Quarter

Peggy Higgins

The night before New Year's Eve was crisp, for the French Quarter, though balmy for any place north of New Orleans. But inside the Havana cigar and coffee bar the hazy aromatic air was as warm as Fidel's homeland. Drinking my bowl of mocha latte and waiting for my dinner companions to arrive, I noticed the two women stroll through the doorway and make themselves at home at the table nearest the bar. One ordered coffee while the other extracted a bottle of wine from her purse, along with a professional-looking corkscrew. The waiter, without comment, brought two stemmed glasses to the table, in addition to the coffee. The wine supplier smiled her thanks, then dipped into her bag again, this time producing a slightly dog-eared restaurant menu which she and her friend both examined, making animated conversation all the while. A distant rumbling from about waist level reminded me that I had been waiting for dinner longer than usual, so I found my own eyes drawn automatically toward the food listings at the neighboring table. I could just make out the word "sushi" and reflected that it had been a while since I had sampled some of those edible works of art, since my usual dinner partner spoke disdainfully about the idea of eating anything that resembled bait. The woman with the wine caught my eye, flashed a gap-toothed grin, and asked if I'd like to see the menu, too.

"We're going to have it delivered here," she said. "Would you like to order some with us?"

I thanked her for her offer, but explained my own eating schedule which probably wouldn't (I hoped) allow time for delivered appetizers. She nodded, grinned again, then extracted a cellular phone from a pocket on the side of her bag and began pushing the buttons to connect her with the food supply. While she talked, my curiosity got the better of my manners, and I asked her friend why they came to one eatery only to order food delivered from another, especially since I noticed from the address on the menu that the sushi bar was only a few blocks away.

"Oh, it got too cold to walk any farther and we didn't want to walk back to her (pointing to the one on the phone) apartment either," explained the other woman.

"So you live here in New Orleans?"

"Fifteen years," the first woman said, as she hung up the phone. "I forgot this was a holiday weekend. They're too busy to deliver but we can get an order to go," she added, this directed to her friend and would-be dining companion.

Before I could commiserate with them about having to either brave the chill and walk to their restaurant of choice, hail a cab, or simply choose another place to eat within closer range, they were already working out their next move, and it didn't have anything to do with settling for less.

"If they still do take-out, we can call a cab," said one.

I nodded, thinking they planned to take the cab themselves, pick up the food, then take it back home.

"We'll need to find out if the driver can go in to pick up the food and then charge us for it when he delivers it," said the other.

And then I stopped nodding, frozen into immobility by the cold logic of a plan, defying weather and holiday scheduling, which still allowed them to sit in warm comfort,

sip their wine, along with a coffee or two, and then eat Japanese food, all in a place that actually only offered two of the four items on that list—warmth and coffee.

A quick confirmation call to a local cab company told them that, yes, the driver could go into the restaurant, pick up the food and add that cost to the cab fare, plus a service fee, of course. And yes, the restaurant could give them a firm time—within five minutes—when their order would be ready. After that, it was all over except for the waiting, and even that didn't take long. By the time my friends showed up, there was only time for quick introductions all around before the cab pulled up at the sidewalk in front of the Havana, honked his horn, and exchanged a large paper bag full of sushi for a wad of cash.

As we left, I waved to the successful strategists, who, in turn, saluted me with their bamboo chopsticks, their mouths already busy chewing.

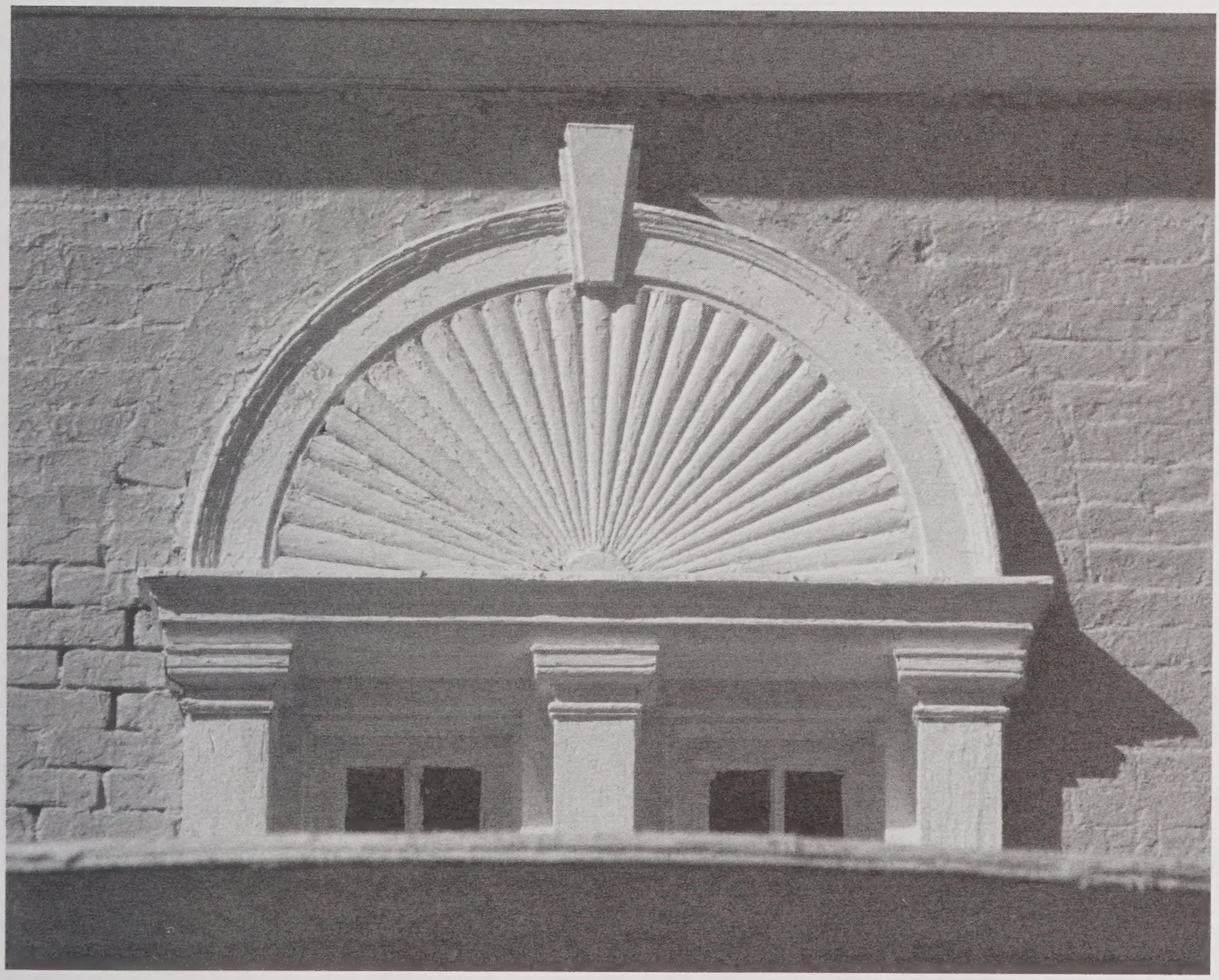


Photo by Shirley McLaughlin

Daybreak over the Blue Ridge

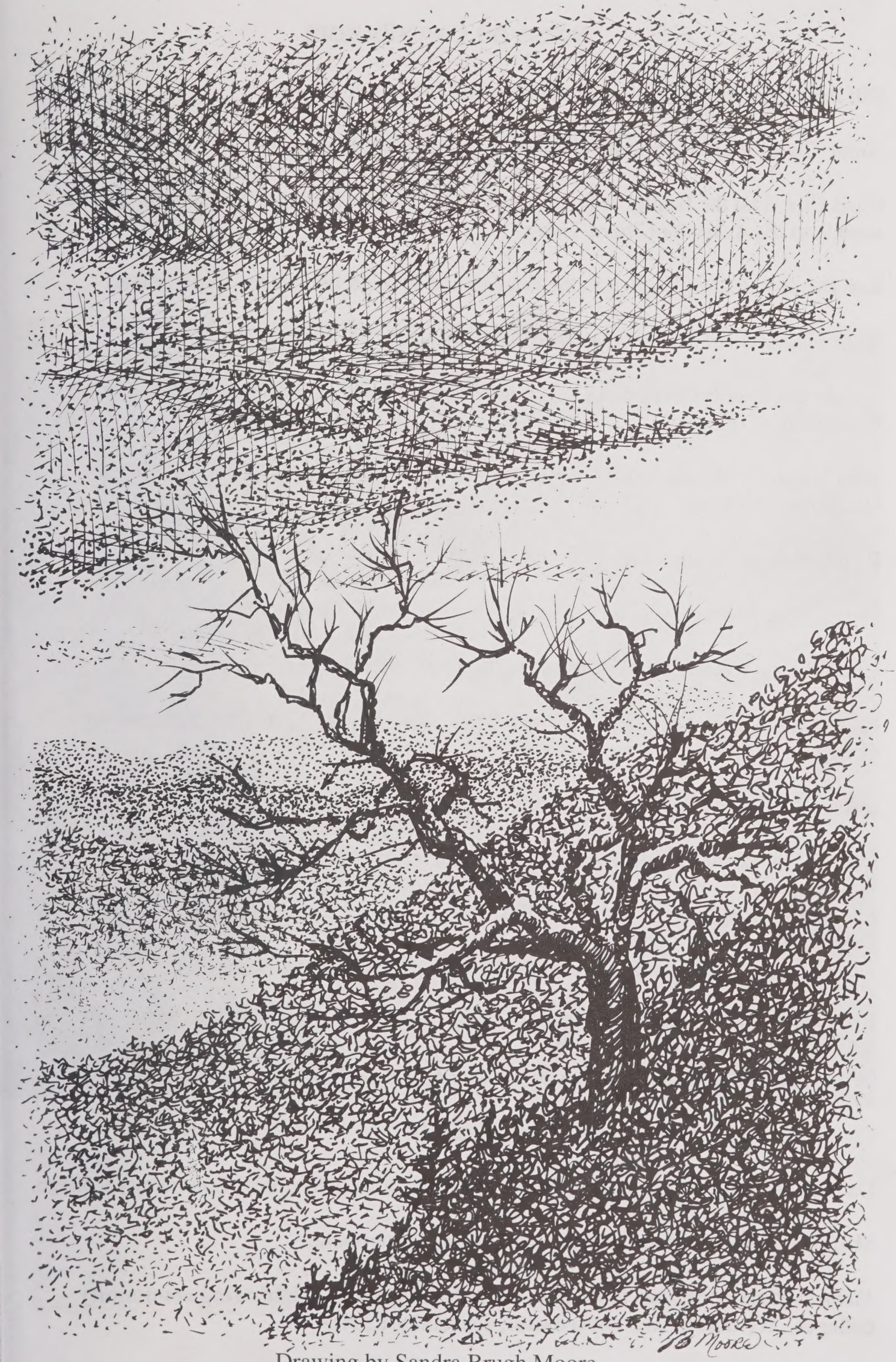
Nancy Dillingham

There is no softness here
save fog's blue hand
as it settles over land
quiet as church
and twice as literal

There is no softness here
One's mettle must be tested
against the harsh line
of oncoming day
that is reality

There is no softness here
no subtleness
just the hard misfortune of time
that lifts one out of dreaming
and into light

Photo by Lee Schleining



Drawing by Sandra Brugh Moore

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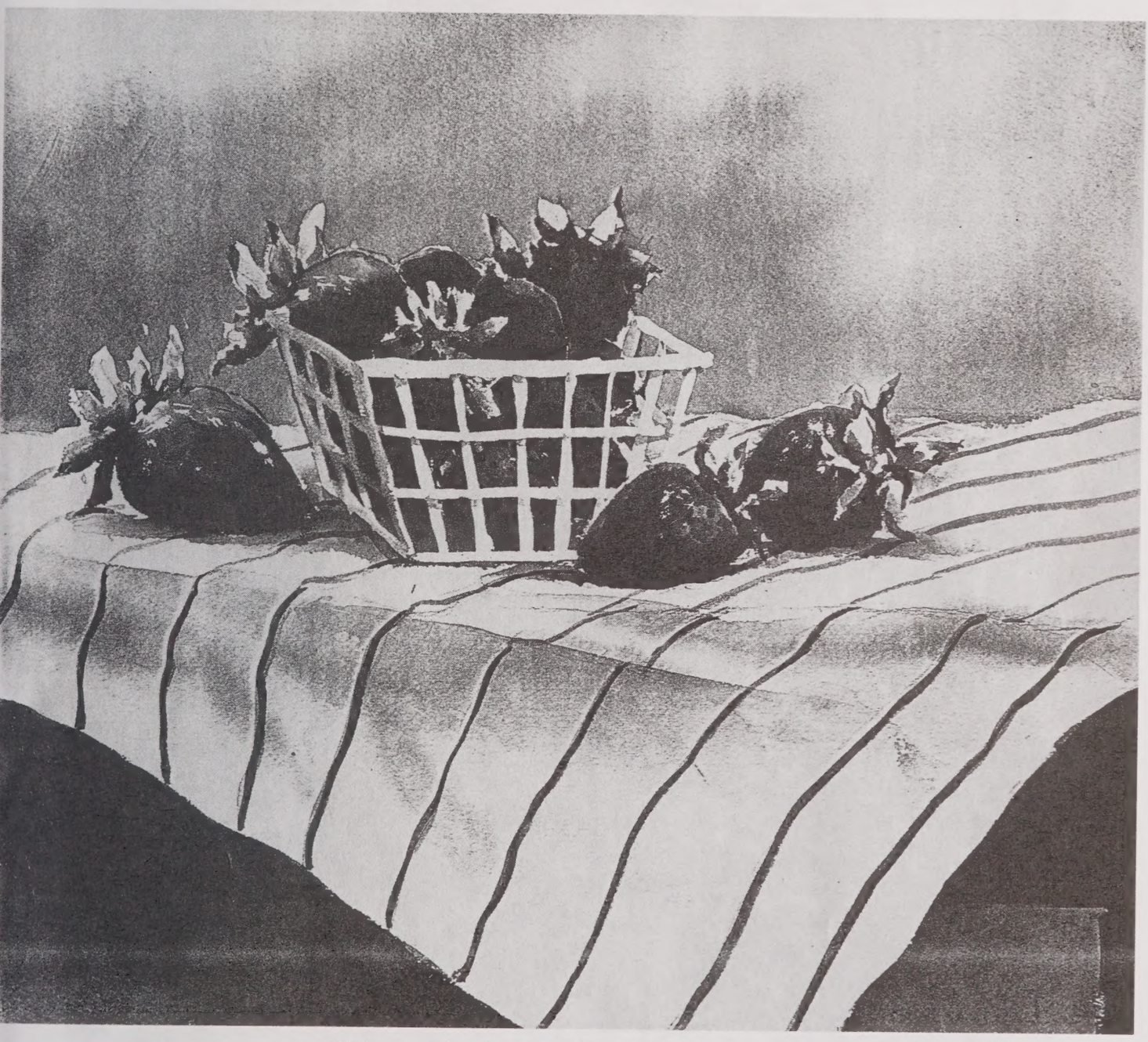
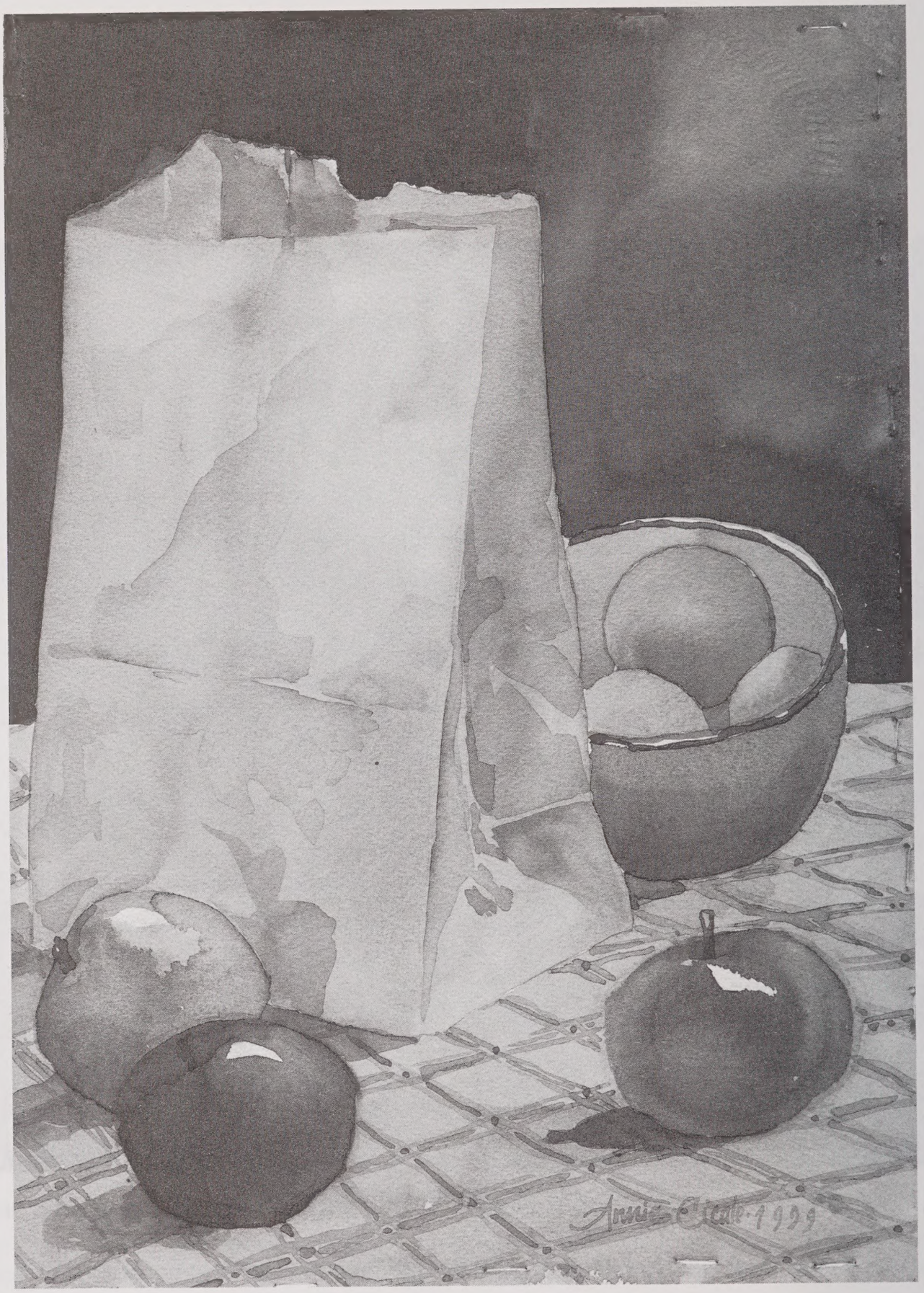
***Victoria Press* continues to include contributions from neighboring community colleges. We thank each contributor, especially Chris Cox.**



Watercolor by Sandra Brugh Moore



Watercolor by Annie Cicale

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